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COVER: A demon warrior and his demon horse emerge from a portal of flames in Stephen Youll's painting, "Exile's Children." **ABOVE:** Richard Bober's art, like this cover to the Stephen Goldin book *Storyteller* and the Jann demonstrates how illustration becomes fine art. See story beginning page 54.

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REALMS OF FANTASY

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Editorial

Hi there, folks. Nice to be back, and thanks so much to those wonderful writers who gave me a break from editorial writing for a few issues. You were lifesavers, not just for me but for the readers who were saved having to read my creaking, groaning attempts to come up with yet another uninspired editorial. Never fear, though, dear readers. I actually do have a topic for this one!

Last week I finally got to meet with some clients whom I had been representing for some time but whom I had never met before. They asked me if they looked like I thought they would, and yes, they pretty much did. I asked them the same question, though, and the reply startled me. One client said, "Well, frankly, I'm surprised. You've been in the business so long and I've been hearing your name for so many years, I thought you'd be a little motherly gray-haired old lady."

Well. Tell me, Ms. Post, what is the proper response to that? I mean, certainly it's a compliment, and I'm delighted to hear that, despite middle-of-the-night mournful mirror inspections, I don't actually resemble Ma Kettle just yet. But on the other hand, after doing the math, I realized that as I was winning the Hugo for Asimov's, this well-known client might well have been in grade school. (This shocking realization that time really does pass has no doubt occurred to others before me, but just as your mother may have told you never to run with a lollipop in your mouth, it's not until you actually have to have the stick removed from your nose that you believe her.)

After retiring to the fainting couch and loosening my corsets, I realized that this year marks my 20th anniversary in the fantasy and science fiction industry. This struck me such a blow that I had to call the chiurgeon to be

bled before I could regain my senses. Once the leeches were removed, I was able to compare and contrast the industry now and then.

Then: there were quite a few SF&F imprints and magazines that newcomers and oldtimers could submit their stuff to. They wouldn't make much money, or be on the New York Times bestseller list, but they'd be getting published regularly and could reasonably expect to make an okay living.

Now: there are six imprints publishing SF and fantasy, and five "professional" magazines. (This is just off the top of my head — if I've forgotten one or two, please forgive me.) Writers, especially fantasy writers, can make a great deal of money and maybe make the Times list. However, if after, say, five books, they fail to perform at that level (or close to it, anyway), well, then, they'd better know how to put together one heck of a Big Mac®. Then: writers in the field are always griping about respect — they don't get any.

Then: genre books and magazine had colorful, eye-grabbing covers, often featuring dragons.

Now: ahem.

Then: if you wrote a book that didn't quite work on the stands, your publisher could hedge the figures when trying to sell the next one to the booksellers.

Now: if your last book tanked, you might as well tattoo the sales figures on your forehead — every bookseller from here to Juneau knows them.

I could go on in this vein, but I think you get the point — times have changed for our little corner of the world, but as Mark Twain said when asked how he felt about an upcoming birthday — "I feel fine, considering the alternative." I think the industry can agree. ♦

Shawna McCarthy

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G'day there!

Great thanks to Lawrence Ronald for replying to my letter (ROF 3.6) and to you for printing it, thus adding several bits to my knowledge base. Until now I thought that Piper's only Cub was the J-3 "cloth moth." I thought that the Piper in L.R.'s illustration was maybe a Seneca or an Aztec. It's public now: I know sod all about aircraft! I also found a picture of a J-3 Cub on "The World of Flight" CD-ROM.

Reynir H. Stefansson
Reydarfirdi, Iceland

Dear *Realms of Fantasy*;

It was with interest that I read the editorial by Jeanne Cavelos entitled "Beauty, Terror and Artistic Arrest" in the August 1997 issue. I would like to tell you and your readers why I have persistently over the years of my life read with great joy all forms of speculative fiction. As a young child of four I was placed in an orphanage. While the nuns who ran the place were not intentionally cruel, they had no time to give each child individual attention. Being the youngest child there and not yet of school age, I spent most of my days playing in the woods which bordered the grounds, or in the deserted dormitory. Having no playmates and believing passionately in Fairyland myself, I created my playmates from twigs and rocks and leaves and other elements of the natural world. Later, while living in England, I discovered Victorian Fairy Tale books sold at stalls on market day in Cambridge and would carefully hoard my small allowance to purchase treasures for a sixpence or a shilling each. Here was the proof that my Fairyland existed. Later still and living in Sacramento some kind librarian had segregated all the science fiction and fantasy literature into one small segment of the library, perhaps more to protect unwary children from it than to suggest we might read it. I discovered Asimov to Zelazny and proceeded to read the entire collection through from start to finish. An otherwise painful and traumatic adolescence was eased again by this country of the mind. I found through fantasy — King Arthur and his knights, Tamerlane and Genghis Kahn, I read Sir Walter Scott and fell in love with Robin Hood and Ivanhoe. Eventually I wandered out to other parts of the library and when ever after I would move to a new town, would judge a library by it's content of speculative fiction.

I have an extensive collection of history, archaeology and myographic books of my own now and my grown children and their children have learned to love books as much

as me. The only fiction I read is speculative fiction. Why? Because there I can return to my own familiar friends of childhood.

Elen Harper
North Bend, OR

Dear Ms. McCarthy;

I am writing in response to the letter sent by Mr. Ryan Kent. Yes, fantasy is supposed to take one away from the here and now. But so should any good book, novel or story. From any genre. As for the wizards, dragons and warriors — I have only one thing to say to Mr. Kent, and those like him, who believe fantasy isn't well-written without them. Shut up. That's right, shut up. I have listened to, or read letters from people complaining that fantasy should exist solely on other worlds, in other times, and with no mention of religions, cultures, and governments of the 20th century. Frankly, I am sick to death of these pigeon-hole whiners. Pigeon-hole: as in refusal to broaden one's horizon. A narrowing of the context of a subject to the extreme point. Dull. Monotonous. I bet if they were mystery lovers they would insist that every novel had a guilty butler in it.

Edith Butler
North Kingston, RI

I'm with you. Limitations, rules, boundaries... essential for unruly children perhaps, but fantasy? Shouldn't the sky be the limit? A true flight of the imagination in any direction?

Dear Jeanne Cavelos:

The question was broached in your editorial "Why do we read this stuff..." I believe the perfect answer is "Because fantasy is real." Much of what people allocate to the world of fantasy is in actuality a reality. I first became aware of this when reading about Friar Roger Bacon and a comparison to Merlin the magician in *The Enchanted World* (Time-Life Books). Upon further research I discovered that Bacon was possibly the greatest scientific mind of his century. Was he a magician? In a way, yes. What Bacon meant by experimental science was the same thing that later scholars like Giambattista della Porta called natural magic.

Other subjects normally confined to the fantasy genre also have this same base in reality. For instance, alchemy is frequently present in fantasy literature, but consider that Isaac Newton was an alchemist.

In the Middle Ages people believed that things could be related by sympathetic magic based on Neoplatonism. Now ponder that

what Neoplatonist called sympathy, C.G. Jung called synchronicity and Quantum theorist call nonlocal causation.

Another example of magic or fantasy vs. "real": what Shakespeare described as fairy rings sound remarkably like today's crop circles... and so forth. So perhaps the magical world view has not truly been destroyed by modern secular humanistic science... it has just been reshuffled.

Nelson M. Wheeler
Carrabelle, FL

Dear Ms. McCarthy;

I wish to respond to the letter from Mr. Kent in the October 1997 issue. I very much agree with his view that traditional fantasy (ie. wizards, warriors and dragons) is quite intriguing and essential. However, I do disagree with his statement that a "today's world" fantasy is less enjoyable. I feel these more modern works can have just as much value as the more traditional fantasy. I mean how many times can we read about a gallant knight on a prancing charger cantering across the cobblestone path to a castle...?

Erin McManaway
Newark, DE

Apparently, nothing warms our readers like a familiar (ie. "traditional") fantasy tale. And why not? As noted in the previous letter by Ellen Harper, perhaps it is a comfortable place to visit. However, nice to know that some of our readers are equally happy when we stray from the "path" now and then.

Dear Shawna:

Terri Windling did not address an important war legend in her delightful October "Folkroots." If I may? Ms. Windling referred to the Lady of the Lake, and how she guards King Arthur as he sleeps on Avalon. Avalon is not only the supposed resting place of King Arthur, but is also the home of Faerie King Oberon and his court. Faerie are said to live "under hills," but King Oberon's Hill is on a magical island surrounded by water. Oberon and the elves of his court have made several appearances in British myths and literature, such as Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Thank you for allowing me to put my two cents in.

Jennifer Svitek
St. Charles, MO

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Rosemary's baby returns among an interesting group of sequels.

Author Robert Holdstock returns to his mysterious and magical world of *Rhyolite Wood in Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn*, the latest in his *Mythago Cycle* series. Cover art by Ron Wiletsky.

IRA LEVIN IS ONE OF THE ROOTIN' TOOTINEST WRITERS OF THE POPULAR FANTASTIC THIS BODACIOUS country of ours has produced. He's turned out wowser after wowser of books and plays which have earned him enormous and richly-deserved success. On top of that, most of them have then become not only hugely profitable but also critically successful movies because they've involved some of filmdom's most talented creators. Also an astonishing number of them have then established themselves as permanent pieces in Americans' basic mental chess sets, mine included, and been at least semi-permanently enshrined in the nation's dictionaries.

The bulk of his work is of such uniformly high quality that it would be hard to pick a favorite among them except for the fact that in *Rosemary's Baby*, Levin hit the button with such spectacularly good effect that it manages to stand out as the certain winner even in such a difficult field.

As a topical curiosity the book was a marvel. With well

nigh malevolent skill it pinned to the public board a broad range of monster forces which had up to then been largely unobserved and worked them into a marvelous fable.

The '60s had an awful lot of things good and bad that, so far as I can see, have not even begun to be perceptively sorted out so far. One thing it was above all others: a period of fantastic detachment from the culture of the past.

This took place on all levels and with all sorts of people. It was not only the Hippies who decided to hit the road, it was also the Middle Class and the Upper Greedy. A very serious, truly fundamental drifting apart began then and it continues and strengthens to this day. Sometimes I suspect its fruition will turn out to be our lonely waiting off in separate space ships. The Serb ship goes off this way, the Black ship goes off that way, and the your subship heads to the cosmic west and mine to the cosmic east.

My solemn bet is that today Levin would probably establish the action in L.A., but since it was the very early '70s, Levin located his fable in New York City which was then America's outstanding example of mutual civic indifference. Dreadful stories of cries of bloody murder ignored crowded the headlines, pundits shook their heads over ever widening social schisms, the brutal financial techniques of the '80s and '90s were getting their first rude try outs, and television news coverage was starting to perfect its presently flawless technique of pushing the panic button in the limbic brain in order to sell comforting products.

Part of the reaction to all of this was the occult explosion which was, I believe, an essentially benign attempt to reverse all of this growing alienation by returning to the simpler pagan virtue of joining with nature instead of constantly trying to defeat it. Among the many manifestations of this popular phenomenon was a gentle variant of witchcraft called Wicca which was practiced nationwide by considerable numbers of patently harmless





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and well-meaning people.

Ha! thinks Levin — suppose there is an active not-so-innocent coven of witches about tucked amongst these gentler souls? A good old-time-religion ready and willing and able to commit murder in the service of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim Satan? What better place for it to thrive than in New York City, capital of the isolated, mecca of the selfish, pinnacle of the highly sophisticated depraved? The notion was not only enthusiastically bought into by out-of-towners but by proud New Yorkers themselves, all of whom seemed to be rather touchingly taken by the notion that the King of Hell would choose their town for the birthing of his offspring. A classic was off and running.

Now, Levin confesses in his "Acknowledgements" section at the tail end of the book, heavyweights such as Alan Ladd, Jr. exerted their formidable powers of persuasion and convinced him to write a sequel to his champion all timer, *Son of Rosemary* (Dutton, New York; 255 pages; hardcover \$22.95).

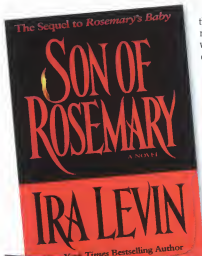
I had not heard of the project being afoot and was both pleased and apprehensive when I received it in the mail. I put off reading it for a day or two because of the trepidation, but then my pleasure at the notion of Rosemary having another go at the forces of evil persuaded me that was childish and I plunged in.

For the first chapter or so I was delighted. Levin renders a superbly skilled account of Rosemary awakening from a twenty-seven-year-old coma induced by wicked witchcraft, and that, together with neatly accumulating hints of what sort of world she has awakened into let me know for sure I was in the hands of a master story weaver. From the start we see the world Rosemary has opened her eyes on is not our world but an alternate one profoundly affected by those '70s witches' depraved meddling. I positively chortled with delight. The thing was going to work!

This mood survived for a few chapters more, even strengthened in anticipation. Rosemary's son, being half devil, is ambiguous about resisting a strong Oedipal attraction towards his mother. Would Hollywood be up to this sort of thematic challenge? How would Alan Ladd, Jr. handle the adaptation of such a tricky property, the property in the era of chronic political correctness?

Then, bit by bit, I regret to say the chortling stopped. I became slightly depressed when I feared I saw where it was all heading and eventually much more depressed when I saw, indeed, it was heading just there. Alas, alas.

Much excellent stuff here, of course. And plenty of it. When you have a writer of Levin's skill and imagination it couldn't be otherwise. But the initial high velocity slows to odd stops and starts and finally bogs down into a sort of wandering amble leading, as noted, exactly where one knew it



would and hoped it wouldn't. Then — and I hate to say it, I really do — he adds insult to injury by tacking a trick end onto that ending. The trick has become one of my pet peeves as it has long been a staple of grade Z movie makers in need of a way to sneak out from under a bogged and tangled plot.

So, most regretfully, I would suggest you give Rosemary's son a pass and think back fondly on her baby. If by some unhappy chance you missed it on the occasion of its birth, or even if you were present at the event but your memory of it's grown a little vague, pick up book one. It's always in print. It deserves to be.

One form of sequel that has worked wonderfully well is found in the books of Robert Holdstock revealing his increasingly deep plumbings into the mysteries of his excellent creation: Ryhope Wood.

These novels are absolutely one of the best fantasy series presently running and very possibly may be among the best ever written. Based on the classic fairy lore premise of

the strange place which has no boundaries nor bottom, adroitly tied in with Jungian wonders such as archetypes and synchronicity and richly (and most importantly) endowed with Holdstock's compassionate sense of humanity, this saga gets richer by the book.

Running through all the novels, the here and now people of our world are represented by the Huxleys who "own" Ryhope Wood. George Huxley, the father, is a scientist whose emerson in obsessive study of the place has one way and another dragged all of his kin into its magical workings. Sometimes we tag along with him directly, sometimes we're exploring the strangenesses of the place with another member of the family, but all of them are shadowed always by their dark and looming patriarch.

His latest, *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn* (Roc, New York; 307 pages; hardcover \$23.95), centers on Christian Huxley, the eldest son. He is lured first of all by his father's journals and the cases of artifacts kept in the scientist's study, then by the lovely, headstrong Guinneth to whom he is drawn increasingly as he encounters her first incarnated as a child, then as a very young girl and finally as a woman.

He also comes across her withered corpse after one of those incarnations since Mythagos — which is the name George Huxley has coined for the denizens of the woods — die when forced to be away from it too long, and Christian has to bear the husk away to a hiding place and bury it. This mortal intimacy only serves to increase his affection for her.

Finally he is absolutely committed by the ghastly suicide of his mother and the possibility of discovering her alive even so, if he will only plunge into the wood.

Time and space move with a loose strangeness in and about Ryhope Wood, both on their own and in their interweavings. Mythic folk of all eras mingle oddly in its environs as do widely differing belief systems from contradictory cultures, widely diverse times encounter one another and clash or tolerate or sometimes meld. All the characters and places and beliefs in their past, present, and occasionally future configurations, are skillfully shuffled and dealt out in arcane, interacting patterns like tarot cards with very much the same evocative effects.

There is a brief passage in the book which speaks of the strange sound of people from different times laughing together at some shared joke by a fire in the dark. The notion sprang up out of the page. I could hear that laughter and it called to mind those crystal clear moments we have, usually in old or dislocating places, when we suddenly stop being isolated in the here and me and spread back and zoom forward with a great, encompassing rush.

I remember one time when I was in the medieval town of Freiburg on the edge of the Black Forest in Germany. I'd come there

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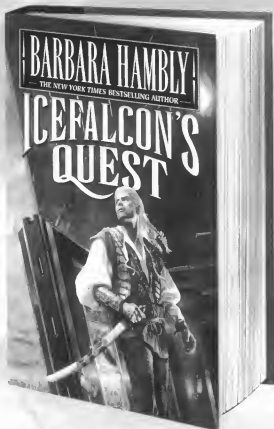
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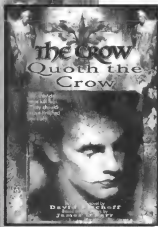
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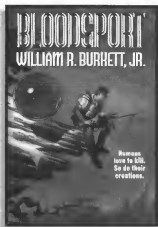


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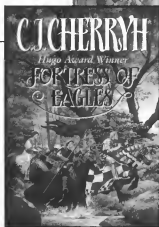
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because a church located in the place was famous for its gargoyles and I wanted to do some drawings of them. I got up at first light in the morning, left my amazingly quaint hotel, and started to climb a steep cobblestone street, heading for the church with my sketchbook in my hand. Suddenly, without any warning at all, the empty street seemed full, absolutely thronged, with the invisible presence of countless wandering artisans who had come at the same time in their lives to climb up this same way to go to the same church to study the same gargoyles. I was the one flesh and blood member of a great crowd of people just like myself. Same age, same bohemian history, same general nuttiness, all of us come from vastly different times and places because we all loved gargoyles. I walked in wonderful comradeship with these friends of mine for perhaps only a minute or so and then they were gone and I was alone and on my own again. But I have never forgotten being part of that company.

Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn tells a fine, romantic story which you will enjoy enormously. It will introduce you to a broad gallery of characters you are certain to remember, but what it does that really sets it apart from the vast bulk of the heaps and piles of books of fantasy cycles inundating us at present is that it is—like all really good fantasy—not in flight from the humanity of the reader and the reader's here and now, it is a deep investigation of it. It is about truth.

The arrival of the sequel, *The Subtle Knife*, the second in a trilogy called *His Dark Materials* by Phillip Pullman (Knopf, New York: 326 pages; hardcover \$20.00), was one which I have been anticipating for some time with a mix of high eagerness and sneaking dread since the first volume, *The Golden Compass*, was so remarkably well done, so packed full of promise, such a total pleasure to read, that it was easy to see how its author, Phillip Pullman, might fail to rise to the huge challenge he'd set himself.

Would the interweavings of the expanding plots continue their marvelously sweeping growth or would they tangle and knot? Would the characters continue to live and breathe? Would Lyra, its heroine, continue to genuinely warm the heart? And would the magnificently sinister villains still give you as fine a set of creeps?

Not to worry. Mr. Pullman knows his stuff up, down, and sidewise and *The Subtle Knife* is every bit as good as its predecessor promised.

This series is about a group of alternate worlds very like the ones proposed by contemporary physics. We began in Lyra's world where each human is born with his or her personal daemon, a lifelong companion which takes the forms of various animals during its human's childhood and then settles on a fixed form which one way or another reflects its human's personality when he or she achieves maturity. A grown human warrior might have a lion for a dae-

mon, for instance, while a sneaky type might find themselves harboring a snake up his or her sleeve. Ordinarily a human and his daemon cannot separate and live, but a vital part of the plot line involves sinister attempts to violate this rule and there are strong intimations that the possibilities lurking in the theme have so far only been hinted at.

Lyra's world tends to the religious/magical so what is called "fundamental physics" in ours is known in hers as "experimental theology". In both worlds these sciences are increasingly concerned with puzzles raised by the unseen substances in outer space which we call "dark matter" and they call "dust". Recent activities of these sciences have increased the openings between these worlds, though occult techniques misused disastrously in yet a third world appear to have anticipated many of their discoveries.

The first book took place almost exclusively in Lyra's world, this one moves on to ours and to the third one mentioned. Marvelous creatures are on all the worlds and we have such diverse wonders as which clans, tribes of armored bears, and invisible specters which suck all but indifference from adults but leave the children be. Pullman's names for all of them and for the humans, too, are Dickensian in their appeal. One leading witch is Serafina Pekkala, another is Ruta Skadi; a king among the armored bears is Iorek Bygoneson.

Hardly any adventurous theme is unexplored and the adventurers, good and evil, are legion: there is Lee Scoresby, the balloonist from Texas, which is a nation in Lyra's world; there is the bold and sinister Marisa Coulter, terrifying in her ruthless search for power; there is Lord Asriel, whose bold plans include a war in heaven, and there is the superbly villainous Sir Charles Latrom, CBE, who would give both Gandalf and James Bond pause.

Young Lyra Silvertongue must, in one way or another, deal with all these varied entities and many, many more. It would seem to be, and now and then does seem to be, far too much for her to handle since Pullman, like Tolkien and Lewis and the other really good ones, knows that the best central heroes are vulnerable ones, but she is possessed of amazing courage and marvelous common sense, and in *The Subtle Knife* she is joined by the twelve-year-old Will Parry who is both as stalwart and touching and human as she. It is a profound pleasure to cheer them on. Actually it is impossible not to cheer them on!

Reviewers and certainly publishers of fantasy are prone to prattle overmuch about "classics", but I really do think Pullman is in the process of pulling one off, and since Book Two of *His Dark Materials* has completely justified the giddy expectations of Book One, Book Three is likely to completely blow us away, knock our socks off and other such excellent things.

If you want to share in its first revelation—it's always fun to be able to tell people you

were in at the ground floor — I suggest you read this excellent trilogy as it appears newborn rather than wait until it is filtered through the dictionaries and guides to and essays on the trilogy which are absolutely certain to appear in tottering heaps five seconds after the first showing of Book Three appears in print.

Also being among the first to read a really grand adventure is really an adventure in itself. Why miss that?

There was a time when illustrating fiction was a huge business, many artists making very large amounts of money at it and their names were known far and wide.

This was away back when in the heyday of the illustrated general magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's* existed and when book publishers liked to see representational stuff on the jackets of their hard covers and on the soft covers of their paperbacks. There was a steady demand for heroines and heroes in embrace or swell action scenes or moody landscapes.

In most areas that all has faded away, or chopped off might be the better phrase since in retrospect the transition really seems to have been shockingly abrupt. Nowadays magazines with pictures in them print very little fiction to illustrate and the bulk of their illustrative elements are almost exclusively photographic. Publishers, hard and soft cover both, favor jackets consisting entirely newborn of print with maybe the occasionally dinky doodle. By and large the market's absolutely vanished.

One area of book and magazine publication has remained pretty much true blue to the illustrators and that's science fiction and fantasy, bless their hearts. I'm not sure just why this is, maybe because it's because they figure that because the stuff's entirely made up out of whole wool it might be a help to the reader if they hired somebody to show them how the robots and martian and gnomes could look. Whatever, it's a real stroke of luck for the artists and a genuine break for those of us who enjoy seeing how talented painters and artists visualize weird creatures and strange worlds.

In *Infinite Worlds* (The Wonderland Press, New York; 320 pages; hardcover \$45.00), Vincent Di Fate, a leading practitioner of depicting odd beings from other planets, has very successfully taken on the Herculean job of assembling a kind of monster portfolio surveying the work of artists in this field from its very early days until now. I have no idea how good its distribution or publicity will be so, though I don't ordinarily cover this sort of thing, I'm taking the liberty of bringing it up in this column for the benefit of those who might be interested.

The book starts with an excellent (what else?) foreword by Ray Bradbury, moves on to an introduction by Di Fate sketching the book's parameters, dives into an extensive and highly informative history of the genre.

Continued on page 73



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BY DAN PEREZ

Robert E. Howard's classic hero comes to the small screen.

Ralf Moeller stars as Conan, with (from left to right) Andrew Craig as Vulkar, Danny Woodburn as Orli, Aly Duvigne as Karella, and Robert McKay as Zzenen.

HERE IS, PERHAPS, NO BETTER ILLUSTRATION OF THE VIVID NATURE OF PULP WRITER Robert E. Howard's imagination than his attempt to succor a lovesick drinking buddy at a late-night card game after the whiskey ran out (excerpted from *Midnight*):

"Cheer up, Red," I said. "Listen—I'll tell you: Somewhere in the world the sun is coming up like a red dragon to shine on a gilded pagoda; somewhere the bleak silver stars are gleaming on the white sands where a magic caravan is sleeping out in the ages. Somewhere the night wind is blowing through the grass of a mysterious grave. Somewhere there is a gossamer sailed ship carving a wake of silver foam across the dark blue of the Mediterranean. This isn't all, Red."

Not all, indeed, for that same imagination would give rise to some of the most popular characters to arise from the pulps, with names like Solomon Kane, King Kull and

Bran Mak Morn, as well as a host of lesser-known characters like Breckenridge Elkins and Francis X. Gordon. But one Howard creation towers over the rest, a Cimmerian barbarian by the name of Conan. In a letter to fellow writer Clark Ashton Smith, Howard described his inspiration for the savage rogue who eventually stole the throne of Aquilonia:

"I've been concentrating on adventure stuff recently, trying to break into that field permanently. I've made a start, with yarns published in *Action*, *Thrilling Adventures*, and *Top-Notch*; got a couple of covers designs in a row with *Top-Notch* and am toiling manfully to become a regular contributor. Sent a three-part serial to Wright yesterday: 'Red Nails', which I devoutly hope he'll like. A Conan yarn, and the grimmest, bloodiest and most merciless story of the series so far. Too much raw meat, maybe, but I merely portrayed what I honestly believe would be the reactions of certain types of people in the situations on which the plot of the story hung. It may sound fantastic to link the term 'realism' with Conan; but as a matter of fact—his supernatural adventures aside—he is the most realistic character I ever evolved. He is simply a combination of a number of men I have known, and I think that's why he seemed to step full-grown into my consciousness when I wrote the first yarn of the series. Some mechanism in my sub-consciousness took the dominant characteristics of various prizefighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers, and honest workmen I had come in contact with, and combining them all, produced the amalgamation I call Conan the Cimmerian."

Robert Ervin Howard, known as "Two Gun Bob" to close friends, was born in the small Texas town of Peaster in 1906. His family moved around the state, following the practice of his father, a country physician, until settling in the central Texas hamlet of Cross Plains in 1919. Howard began to write short stories in high school, and his first submission, "Bill Smalley and the Power of the Human Eye,"



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Former Mr. Universe Ralf Moeller stars as Conan, whose television mission includes bringing freedom back to his Cimmerian homeland.

was rejected by both *Western Story* and *Adventure* in 1921. His first sale, a prehistoric tale called "Spear and Fang," sold to *Weird Tales* (which would also launch the careers of Ray Bradbury, Robert Bloch and H.P. Lovecraft) for \$18 in 1924.

After high school, Howard worked a variety of odd jobs, including a stint writing oil field news for various papers, while still writing stories. He became discouraged with his lack of writing success in 1924 and enrolled in a college bookkeeping course. But he resumed writing before long, continuing his relationship with *Weird Tales*, and in the years that followed, the characters of Puritan swordsman Solomon Kane and King Kull of Atlantis saw print for the first time.

By 1930, Howard was writing prolifically for various magazines, and he was forced to branch out even more when many magazines cut back on publication during the Great Depression. In November of 1932, Howard introduced the Pictish chieftain Bran Mak Morn in *Weird Tales*, and a month after that, Conan the Cimmerian saw print in the same magazine. The first Conan story, "The Phoenix on the Sword" was actually a rewrite of an earlier Kull story titled "By This Axe I Rule!"

Seventeen Conan stories followed in *Weird Tales* over the next four years, many of them lengthy enough to require serialization. "The Hour of the Dragon" was scheduled to become Howard's first book, but the publishing house went into receivership before it was published (it has since been published as *Conan the Conqueror*).

The best of times and the worst of times came in 1936, when Howard was seeing

more success than ever with his writing. He was corresponding regularly with writers like Lovecraft and Smith. But he was also seriously concerned over his mother's deteriorating health after she underwent surgery in 1935. On June 11, 1936, after being told his mother would never regain consciousness from a coma, Howard wrote his final words, found later on a page still rolled into his Underwood No. 5 typewriter:

*All fled, all done,
 so lift me on the pyre:
 The feast is over,
 The lamps expire.*

Howard shot himself in his car and died eight hours later, and his beloved mother died thirty hours after that. But his literary creations live on in the form of books, stories, comics, movies and television shows. *Conan the Adventurer* is a new syndicated television show based on the exploits of the Cimmerian. It premiered in September and stars former Mr. Universe Ralf Moeller in the title role. The show also stars *Seinfeld* regular Danny Woodburn, as well as Andrew Craig, Robert McRay, and Aly Dunne.

"I was big fan of the Conan movies," says executive producer Max Keller of how the show came about, "and I thought that it would be a wonderful franchise for television. So I pursued the rights from Conan Properties for television and was able to acquire them two years ago. It was in development from the time we got the rights, about a year and some change, and then we went into production last year. It went fairly smoothly. It was just a really good concept."

Moeller was chosen after a casting call that interviewed hundreds of actors from all over

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To become a Cimmerian, Ralf Moeller had to develop his swordsmanship and his horseback riding skills.

the world. "Ralph fit the bill, that's for sure," Kellar notes.

The German-born Moeller had to train for the role, however. "Well, he had to do sword-fighting," says Kellar. "And so he had to learn swordplay, horseback riding, and of course bodybuilding—he already came to the table with that because he was a Mr. Universe."

The two hour pilot movie, *Heart of the Elephant*, drew elements from Howard's story

"Tower of the Elephant." Do the producers plan to use other stories for the series? "Yeah, wherever possible," says Kellar. "The main issue with the Howard stories is that he was so prolific as a novelist, and had such a vivid imagination, that some of his stories can be three or four paragraphs in a book and be a whole story by itself. It wasn't really quite possible to use one book and say, 'Okay, this is an episode,' because there are many sto-

ries inside his stories, so we had to find a way to break them out and translate them into television episodes."

One departure from the stories is the addition of a group of sidekick companions for Conan. These were added, according to Kellar, "because of the idea that people prefer to watch characters that they can relate to on a multiple basis and not just one character. So we tried to find characters that would be relatable to various segments of the audience: children, women, men."

As for the tone of the stories, Kellar says, "We try to make a very clear line between good and evil. We try to have Conan as a hero to fight oppression and free the people as compared to some of the Howard slant of him being a rogue and a thief: a barbarian. So we basically have to try and keep the elements of the barbarian to be utilized as a force against evil."

Kellar goes on to note that *Conan the Adventurer* is syndicated in "about eighty countries worldwide. Our demographics are such that we're getting [audiences aged] from 12 to 45, really and doing very well."

The show is shot almost exclusively in and around Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. "We have a studio there," Kellar says, "so we shoot in the studio frequently. We go to the beach often and we also [shoot] in the forest."

Kellar responds to the inevitable comparisons with groundbreaking shows like *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* and *Xena*:



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Warrior Princess by saying, "Well, the difference is that we're really not camp. You know, Conan takes himself seriously and while we have humor coming out of the situations and the characters, we don't try to be funny or cute or camp. That's one of the main differences."

This means that there are also no "holiday-themed" episodes such as those done on *Hercules* and *Xena*. "No we don't," notes Kellar, "because we're dealing with a time period that's twelve thousand years before, so there's no Halloween, no Thanksgiving."

According to Kellar, the biggest challenge in producing *Conan the Adventurer* is, to deliver to the audience an acceptable level of CGI—computer generated imagery—for the fantasy monsters. "The problem is that the television budget is literally just a fraction of the movie budget. Each episode might be a million dollars for one hour, and a movie is 50 million dollars. We try to have an acceptable level of special effects. We have an in-house group of people who come from all of the major studios in Hollywood. The physical effects are done on location. We have a man who's in charge of it in Puerto Vallarta named Peter Chesney, one of our producers. And Peter created the mechanical effects for [Nightmare on Elm Street's] Freddy. He was doing mechanical effects for *Men in Black*. He's one of the world's leading mechanical effects persons. He basically oversees all the physical effects."

Is Kellar a reader of fantasy or sci-fi fiction? "I'm not a big science fiction buff in the reading department. I like to go to movies. I'm a big fan of *Independence Day*. I like *Wes Craven's* movies, like *Scream*."

Still, Kellar doesn't anticipate pursuing a horror television series. "Horror doesn't play very well, internationally. Prime time usually does stuff like that."

Kellar's biggest satisfaction comes from "reading the email and comments. I can see that we went at the very beginning from outraged people to kind of mixed reviews from them. Lately we're pretty much had about 90% happy people, so I've enjoyed that."

When asked what people were upset with initially, Kellar says, "I think it was just the shock that television is different from movies and different than the novels. Now they see that what we're doing is, in our own way, our own franchise and our own take on it, and that we're delivering on the quality of production, both in terms of the production value and the writing—interesting stories and fun characters. They seem to like it, and so it's very satisfying."

In addition to Kellar Entertainment Group's ongoing *Conan* and *Tarzan* series, Kellar says of their next genre-related project: "Well, we're developing a show called *Ramses*, based on Egyptian mythology and the Ramses character. We're going to announce it in January at the National Association of Television Producers [conference]. It'll be in production next summer." ■



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The Golden Arrows of Eros: Mythic Tales of Passion and Desire

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A FAIR MAIDEN NAMED PSYCHE. SO GREAT WAS HER beauty that men began to neglect the temples of Aphrodite—and this made Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, livid with anger. The goddess called her son to her side saying, "Eros, I want you to cause this wretched girl to fall in love. Loose your golden arrows and let her desire a loathsome beast." Eros set out upon this errand, but when he reached the maiden's door her beauty was so great that the god of love fell in love himself.

Psyche's father suspected that Aphrodite meant to cause her harm and so he sent to the oracle of Apollo for divine advice. The oracle sent terrible news: The girl was destined to wed a beast. This fate was inescapable, and the girl was carried off by the winds to the isolated palace of her bridegroom. By day she dwelled in solitude, but by night her husband came to her—and although she never saw his face, under her hands she felt the warm flesh of a man and not a beast. Each night the girl was kissed and caressed; by dawn

her bed was empty once more. She soon fell in love with the passionate being who held her in his arms by dark and she longed to see his face and form, but this was not permitted.

Now, this girl had two sisters, newly wed, and the winds allowed her to visit with them. The sisters feared that she'd married a beast; they urged her to light a candle and look. Eventually their fear and her own curiosity got the best of her. As her husband lay

sleeping, she lit a single candle ... and found no monster there but a beautiful youth, with skin white as milk and hair black like ravens' wings. Three drops of wax fell from the candle, and Eros woke, and cried with grief. He turned into a winged serpent, flew out the window, and disappeared. Pregnant with the god's child, Psyche set off to search for him. It was only after many trials that she won her husband back and was made an immortal herself, appeasing the pride of the goddess at last.

This sensuous tale from ancient Greece (echoed in *Beauty and the Beast*; *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*; *Ulyssey and Penelope*; and other tales from around the world) is just one of many myths and folktales that acknowledge the power of sensual love, embodied here in the form of Eros: the god of passion. Such tales can be called "erotic" tales, celebrating the forces of love and desire to which even Eros himself must bow. They are part of a mytho-erotic tradition as ancient as myth itself. Among our oldest stories are sensual and downright bawdy tales, found in oral traditions and ancient writings from all around the globe—perhaps most famously in the myths of Greece, where Zeus pursued nymphs and maidens with abandon, where sexual jealousies were rife between the gods, and where Eros loosed his arrows to cause all manner of divine mischief. Eros was depicted as a handsome winged boy, sometimes tender and sometimes cruel; he carried two kinds of arrows in his sheath: the golden arrows of

Folklore includes many creatures of sensuous allure, including mermaids and selkies who lurk by water's edge. This "Siren" was painted by Pre-Raphaelite artist John William Waterhouse.



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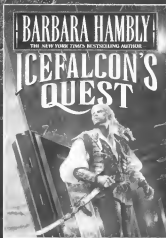
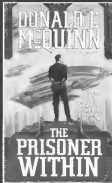
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Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for *The Rape of the Lock* (above) and other tales were frequently considered shockingly erotic.

earlier this year, Trickster is a paradoxical creature, both very clever and very foolish, a culture hero and destructive influence—often at one and the same time. Hermes, Loki, Pan, and Reynardine are all European aspects of the Trickster myth; others from around the world include Maui of Polynesia, Uncle Tompa in Tibet, Coyote in North America, and the shape-shifting foxes of China and Japan. Coyote tales in particular are often sexual, scatological and very funny—tales of seduction (usually foiled), rape (which usually backfires), and all manner of sexual tom-foolery: phalluses that sail through the air to reach their intended target, farts and turds with magical powers, gender switches or impersonations involving animal bladders disguised as genitalia, and other tricks intended to appease a gluttonous sexual appetite. The Asian shape-shifting fox Tricksters are darker and more dangerous, seeking sexual possession of men and women in order to feed upon the vital life force that maintains their power. Trickster tales bridge the gap between the great cosmological myth cycles and folk tales told 'round the fireside—for Trickster is equally at home in the house of the gods (as Loki or Hermes) or in the woods with the fairies (as Phooka, Puck, or Robin Goodfellow).

Turning from mythological stories to humble folk and fairy tales, we find that the overwhelming force of Eros is still a common theme. The woods of Europe, the mountains of Asia, the rain-forests of South America and the frigid lands of the Canadian north are all filled with fairy creatures, nature spirits, and other apparitions that bewitch, beguile, and seduce. The fairy lore most of us know today comes from either children's books or Disney animations, and so the popular image of fairies is of sweet little sprites

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with butterfly wings, sexless as innocent children. Yet our ancestors knew the fairies as creatures of nature: capricious, dangerous, and well acquainted with the earthly passions. Folklore is filled with cautionary tales outlining the perils of faery seduction, reminding us that a lovely maid met on a woodland path by dusk might be a fairy in disguise; her kisses sweet could cost a man his sanity, or his life.

The Irish glancouer, or Love-Talker, appears in the form of a charming young man—but woe to the woman who walks with him, for she will pine for this fairy's touch and lose all will to live. The Elfin Knight of Scottish balladry seduces virtuous maidens from their beds; these girls end up at the bottom of cold, deep rivers by his treacherous hand. The leanan-sidhe is the fairy muse who inspires poets and artists with her touch, causing them to burn so brightly that they die long before their time. The woodwives of Scandinavia are earthy, wild, and sensuous—yet their feminine allure is illusory and from the back their bodies are hollow. Nix and nixies are the male and female spirits that dwell in English rivers, heartbreakingly beautiful to look upon yet very dangerous to kiss—like the beautiful bonga maidens who haunt the riversides of India, the cacce-halde in Lapland streams, and the neriads in the hidden pools and springs of ancient Greece. Mermaids sun themselves by the ocean's edge and sing their irresistible song; sailors who lust for them are drawn into the waves and drown. Mermen and selkies (seal-men) come to shore to mate with human maid—but soon abandon their pregnant mortal lovers for the call of the waves.

When we look at older versions of stories we now consider children's tales (*Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, etc.), we find they too have a sensual edge missing in the modern re-tellings. In the earliest versions of *Sleeping Beauty*, the princess is awakened from her long sleep not by a single respectful kiss but by the birth of twins after the prince has come, fornicated with her passive body, and left again. In "animal bridegroom" stories older than the familiar version of *Beauty and the Beast*, the heroine is wed to the beastly groom before his final transformation; by the dark of night he sheds his animal shape and comes to her bed. "Take off your clothes and come under the covers," says the wolf to Little Red Riding Hood. "I need to go outside and relieve myself," the girl prevaricates. "Urinate in the bed, my child," says the wolf, a wicked gleam in his eye—and only then does she know it is not Grandmother beneath the bedclothes. These were not tales created for children; they were tales for an adult audience—for listeners and readers who knew that the passions of princes are not always chaste; that beautiful girls might grow up to marry beasts; and that lecherous wolves can lurk in the woods or dress up in women's clothes.



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Sensual vampire tales, depicted in films like *Nosferatu*, above, and the books of Anne Rice cross over from works of horror into the realm of fantasy.

For centuries, men and women have drawn upon a wealth of mythic imagery to create fine works of art dedicated to the gods of sensual love and desire—in painting, pottery, sculpture, drama, dance, lyric verse, and prose. This legacy comes to us in beautiful works of ancient poetry: from Anakreon ("I clutched [Eros] by the wings and thrust him into the wine and drank him quickly") and Sappho of Greece ("I am a trembling thing, like grass, an inch from dying"); from the women poets of old Japan such as Onono Komachi ("When my desire grows too fierce I wear my bedclothes inside out") and Izumi Shikibu ("How deeply my body is stained with yours"); as well as China's "Empress of Song" Li Ch'ing-Chao ("I hold myself in tired arms until even my dreams turn black"). In India, the deliciously sensual stories of Shiva, the dancing goddess, and Krishna's amorous exploits, are beautifully evoked by numerous poets including Jelaluddin Rumi, whose verses became ecstatic dances for the whirling dervishes ("When lovers moan, they're telling our story, like this ..."), and the Indian princess Mirabai, whose gorgeous, passionate poems were addressed to Krishna, the Dark One ("At midnight she goes out half-mad to slake her thirst at his fountain"). [For complete transcriptions of these and other "poems of love and longing" from ancient times to the present, seek out *The Erotic Spirit*, an excellent and informative anthology edited by Sam Hamill.]

In the West, a repressive influence dominated the arts as Christian society sought to distance itself from the earthy sexuality of the older animist religions. As a result, we have only a paltry store of poetry and prose expressing the physical passions of love from the Fourth century onward (compared to India, China, and Japan where sensual love continued to be perceived as a natural force and not a cause for shame). Yet by using symbols drawn from pre-Christian myth and

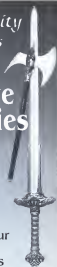
folklore, Western artists and writers found an important outlet for the imagery of desire. We see this particularly in the luminous art of the Italian Renaissance, where Christian devotional works sit side-by-side with mythic works of a distinctly sensual nature—such as Botticelli's voluptuous nymphs and pagan goddesses; Michaelangelo's "Leda" (Leda's rape by Jupiter in the form of a swan); and Raphael's secret frescoes for the bathroom of Cardinal Bibbiena in the Vatican.

In Western literature, sensuality is firmly entwined with myth and fantasy in works by some of the greatest writers of the English language. We find it in the beguiling faery enchantresses of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*; in the men and women bespelled by love and glamour in the *Lays of Marie de France*; in the sexual intrigues of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*; in the amorous antics of the faery court in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as well as the darkly magical sensuality of *The Tempest*; in the sexualized denizens of fairyland in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*; in the dangers of fairy seduction found in the ballads of Sir Walter Scott as well as the poems of Byron, Keats, Blake, Tennyson, and Yeats.

In Victorian England, folk tales, fairy lore, and Arthurian symbolism enjoyed an explosive popularity at the same time that sensual expression was most repressed in polite society. Fairy paintings by Fuesili, Noel Paton, and J.A. Fitzgerald fairly drip with an eroticism that would have been banned from respectable galleries if the nudes painted so lusciously had not been given fairy wings. Aubrey Beardsley, on the other hand, never courted respectability; this young man's distinctive illustrations for *The Rape of the Lock* and other fantasies were deliberately shocking, full of languid, half-clad women surrounded by fairies and satyrs. Rossetti's mythic Pre-Raphaelite ladies, with their pouting red lips just waiting to be kissed, were attacked in the Victorian press as lewd

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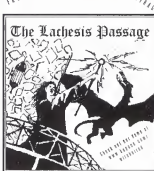
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and immoral images (these paintings merely look quaintly romantic to us today). *Goblin Market*, the famous fairy poem by Christina Rossetti (sister to the painter), was ostensibly a simple story about the dangers of eating goblin fruit—yet it reads as a heated metaphor for the seduction of innocent young girls. The “fairy music” composed for the harp—a popular fad in Victorian times—also had distinctly erotic overtones; these composers enjoyed the celebrity accorded to pop stars today, and flushed young women would sigh and swoon during their performances. Richard Burton’s translation of the magical Arabian stories of *The Thousand and One Nights* also brought sensual tales to the Victorian public in the form of fairy stories. Burton’s frank (for the times) translation caused a publishing scandal; nonetheless (or because of this) the book went on to become a best-seller, and a fad for Orientalism joined the popularity of Victorian fairy lore—a distinct thread of magical sensuality running through them both.

In the early 20th century, the Celtic Twilight writers continued to give a sensual quality to works drawn from folklore and myth, such as the Irish fairy poetry of Yeats (“Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound, our breasts are heaving, our eyes are agleam”) and the opium-dream prose of the Irish fantasist Lord Dunsany. But as the century progressed, fairy lore was relegated to the nursery (much like furniture that has gone out of style, as J.R.R. Tolkien has pointed out), and thus was stripped of all but the most tenacious elements of sensuality. As *fin-de-siècle* fairy lore became passe, we must turn instead to the Surrealists for dreamlike imagery drawing upon the symbolism of mythic archetypes. Particularly notable in this regard are the stories and paintings of Leonora Carrington and her close friend Remedios Varo, both of whom had a keen interest in magical esoterica. The paintings of Max Ernst, Dorothea Tanning, and Salvador Dali also display vivid, deliberately disturbing mytho-erotic elements.

As Surrealism, too, faltered with the change of fashions after World War II, works of sensual magic became harder to find... unless one looked at its darker manifestation: the vampire’s kiss. From Hertzog’s film *Nosferatu* to *Interview With The Vampire* by Anne Rice, the sensual nature of vampire tales surely needs no explication. While it is not the intent of this column to stray into the field of horror fiction (a vast area all on its own), vampire tales seem to cross that elusive line between works of fantasy and horror, holding an irresistible appeal even to readers who traditionally avoid the latter (perhaps because of the close connection of vampires in traditional lore with the seductive, soul-sucking creatures that haunt the woods of the Faery Realm). As the century closes, and the field of literary fantasy enjoys a popular resurgence, we find that the magical tales that have a sensual edge still tend to

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hover close to that fantasy/horror divide, combining the symbols of myth and folklore with the tropes of Gothic horror. Angela Carter's brilliant fiction, for instance, is sensuous, magical, and very dark—such as *The War of Dreams*, a voluptuous work of modern Surrealism, and *The Bloody Chamber*, which brings an adult sophistication back to fairy tales. (*In The Company of Wolves* is a film based upon a story in the latter collection, with an excellent, rather Freudian screenplay written by Carter herself.) Tanith Lee's *Red as Blood* is a collection of adult fairy tales retold in a similar vein, devilishly dark in tone. Sara Maitland's *The Book of Spells*, Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*, and Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* are three more superb variations on this theme.

With the ubiquitous (and, to my mind, pernicious) pairing of sexuality and violence in our modern culture, it is more difficult to find sensual fantasy fiction when we stray from the dark edge of the field ... and yet "high fantasy" books do exist containing sensuous imagery—such as Ellen Kushner's *Thomas the Rhymer*, a delightfully adult re-telling of the Scottish ballad of that name; Patricia A. McKillip's *Winter Rose*, a passionate re-working of the ballad "Tam Lin"; Delia Sherman's *The Porcelain Dove*, a subtle and elegant exploration of sexual morays during the French Revolution; Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*, an earthy, tactile, deeply mythological tale set in an English wood; and Midori Snyder's forthcoming *The Lunnorati*, an exuberantly lusty saga based upon an old Italian myth.

In poetry, a number of writers have used folkloric themes to sensuous effect, including Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas, Bill Lewis, Liz Lochhead, and Jane Yolen. In the visual arts, Brian Froud explores a hilariously bawdy vision of fairies (*Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Book*, with text by Monty Python's Terry Jones); while painters such as Paula Rego, Leonor Fini, and Jacqueline Moreau portray sophisticated, adult symbolism drawn from fairy tales and myths.

"Doll art" is an unusual area in which to look for sensuous art, since dolls, like fairy stories, are thought to be the exclusive province of children—yet in the annual *Dolls as Art* show at the CFM Gallery in New York one finds romantic, phantasmagoric imagery created expressly for adult viewers by such sculptors as Wendy Froud, Monica, Richard Prowse, and Lisa Lichtenfels.

In both the literary and visual arts, fantasy is used as a potent means to express the inexpressible, to evoke archetypes, to provoke the gods, to cross over known boundaries into the unknown lands beyond. The art of Eros, like art of fantasy, is a realm the "serious" artist is not encouraged to travel or linger in. But fantasists learn early to ignore such limiting rules and boundaries, preferring to follow those beguiling creatures that beckon them into the woods. ...



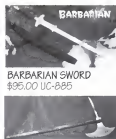
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*Did you ever wonder how Peter Pan
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Lost Girls

BY JANE YOLEN

Illustration by AnnieLunsford

It isn't fair!" Darla complained to her mom for the third time during their bedtime reading. She meant it wasn't fair that Wendy only did the housework in 'Neverland and that Peter Pan and the boys got to fight Captain Hook.

"Well, I can't change it," Mom said in her even, lawyer voice. "That's just the way it is in the book. Your argument is with Mr. Barrie, the author, and he's long dead. Should I go on?"

"Yes. No. I don't know," Darla said, coming down on both sides of the question, as she often did.

Mom shrugged and closed the book, and that was the end of the night's reading.

Darla watched impassively as her mom got up and left the room, snapping off the bedside lamp as she went. When she closed the door there was just a rim of light from the hall showing around three sides of the door, making it look like something out of a science fiction movie. Darla pulled the covers up over her nose. Her breath made the space feel like a little oven.

"Not fair at all," Darla said to the dark, and she didn't just mean the book. She wasn't the least bit sleepy.

But the house made its comfortable light-settling noises around her; the breathy whispers of the hot air through the vents, the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall, the sound of the maple branch scritch-scratching against the clapboard siding. They were a familiar lullaby, comforting and soothing. Darla didn't mean to go to sleep, but she did.

Either that or she stepped out of her bed and walked through

the closed door into Neverland.

Take your pick.

It didn't feel at all like a dream to Darla. The details were too exact. And she could smell things. She'd never smelled anything in a dream before. So Darla had no reason to believe that what happened to her next was anything but real.

One minute she had gotten up out of bed, heading for the bathroom, and the very next she was sliding down the trunk of a very large smooth tree. The trunk was unlike any of the maples in her own yard, being a kind of yellowish color. It felt almost slippery under her hands and smelled like bananas gone slightly bad. Her nightgown mewed a sound like whoosh as she slid along.

When she landed on the ground, she tripped over a large root and stubbed her toe.

"Ow!" she said.

"Shhhh!" cautioned someone near her.

She looked up and saw two boys in matching regged cut-offs and T-shirts staring at her. "Shhhh! yourselves," she said,

wondering at the same time who they were.

But it hadn't been those boys who spoke. A third boy, behind her, tapped her on the shoulder and whispered, "If you aren't quiet, he will find us."

She turned ready to ask who he was. But the boy dressed in green tights and a green shirt and a rather silly green hat, and smelt like fresh lavender, held a finger up to his lips. They were perfect lips. Like a movie star's. Darla knew him at once.

"Peter," she whispered. "Peter Pan."

He swept the hat off and gave her a deep bow.

"Wendy," he countered

"Well, Darla, actually," she said.

"Wendy Darla," he said. "Give us a thimble."

She and her mom had read the part in the book already, where Peter got kiss and thimble mixed up, and she guessed what it was he really meant, but she wasn't about to kiss him. She was smuch too young to be kissing boys. Especially boys she'd just met. AND he had to be more a man than a boy, anyway, no matter how young he looked. The copy of Peter Pan she and her mother had been reading had belonged to her grandmother originally. Besides, Darla wasn't sure she liked Peter. Of course, she wasn't sure she didn't like him. It was a bit confusing. Darla hated things being confusing, like her parents' divorce and her dad's new young wife and their twins who were — and who weren't exactly — her brothers.

"I don't have a thimble," she said, pretending not to understand.

"I have," he said, smiling with persuasive boyish charm. "Can I give it to you?"

But she looked down at her feet in order not to answer, which was how she mostly responded to her dad these days, and that was that. At least for the moment. She didn't want to think any further ahead, and neither, it seemed, did Peter.

He shrugged and took her hand, dragging her down a path that smelled of moldy old leaves. Darla was too surprised to protest. And besides, Peter was lots stronger than she was. The two boys followed. When they got to a large dark brown tree whose odor reminded Darla of her grandmother's wardrobe, musty and ancient, Peter stopped. He let go of her hand and jumped up on one of the twisted roots that were looped over and around one another like woody snakes. Darla was suddenly reminded of her school principal when he towered above the students at assembly. He was a tall man but the dais he stood on made him seem even taller. When you sat in the front row, you could look up his nose. She could look up Peter's nose now. Like her principal, he didn't look so grand that way. Or so threatening.

"Here's where we live," Peter said, his hand in a large sweeping motion. Throwing his head back, he crowed like a rooster, he no longer seemed afraid of making noise. Then he said, "You'll like it."

"Maybe I will. Maybe I won't," Darla answered, talking to her feet again.

Peter's perfect mouth made a small pout as if that weren't the response he'd been expecting. Then he jumped down into a dark space between the roots. The other boys followed him. Not to be left behind, in case that rooster crow really had called something awful to them, Darla went after the boys into the dark place. She found what they had actually gone through was a door that was still slightly ajar.

The door opened on to a long, even darker passage that wound into the very center of the tree; the passage smelled damp, like bathing suits left still wet in a closet. Peter and the boys seemed to know the way without any need of light. But Darla was constantly afraid of stumbling and she was glad when someone reached out and held her hand.

Then one last turn and there was suddenly plenty of light from hundred of little candles set in holders that were screwed right into the living heart of the wood. By the candlelight she saw it was Peter who had hold of her hand.

"Welcome to Neverland," Peter said, as if this were supposed to be a big surprise.

Darla took her hand away from his. "It's smaller than I thought it would be," she said. This time she looked right at him.

Peter's perfect mouth turned down again. "It's big enough for us," he said. Then as if a sudden thought had struck him, he smiled. "But too small for *Him*," He put his back to Darla and shouted, "Let's have a party. We've got us a new Wendy."

Suddenly, from all corners of the room, boys came tumbling and stumbling and dancing, and pushing one another to get a look at her. They were shockingly noisy and all smelled like unwashed socks. One of them made fart noises with his mouth. She wondered if any of them had taken a bath recently. They were worse — Darla thought — than her Stemple cousins, who were so awful their parents never took them anywhere anymore, not out to a restaurant or the movies or anyplace at all.

"Stop it!" she said.

The boys stopped at once.

"I told you," Peter said. "She's a regular Wendy all right. She's even given me a thimble."

Darla's jaw dropped at the lie. *How could he?*

She started to say "I did not!" but the boys were already cheering so loudly her protestations went unheard.

"Tink," Peter called, and one of the candles detached itself from the heartwood to flutter around his head, "tell the Wendys we want a Welcome Feast."

The Wendys? Darla bit her lip. *What did Peter mean by that?*

The little light flickered on and off. *A kind of code*, Darla thought. She assumed it was the fairy Tinker Bell, but she couldn't really make out what this Tink looked like except for that flickering, fluttering presence. But as if understanding Peter's request, the flicker took off toward a black corner and, shedding but a little light, flew right into the dark.

"Good old Tink," Peter said, and he smiled at Darla with such practice, dimples appeared simultaneously on both sides of his mouth.

"What kind of food . . ." Darla began.

**"Welcome to
Neverland,"
Peter said, as if this
were supposed to be
a big surprise.**

"Everything parents won't let you have," Peter answered. Sticky buns and tippy cake and Butterfingers and brownies and . . ."

The boys gathered around them, chanting the names as if they were the lyrics to some kind of song, adding, ". . . apple tarts and gingerbread and chocolate mousse and trifle and . . ."

"And stomachaches and sugar highs," Darla said stubbornly. "My dad's a nutritionist. I'm only allowed healthy food."

Peter turned his practiced dimpled smile on her again. "Forget your father. You're in Neverland now, and no one need ever go back home from here."

At that Darla burst into tears, half in frustration and half in fear. She actually liked her dad, as well as loved him, despite the fact that he'd left her for his new wife, and despite the fact of the twins, who were actually adorable as long as she didn't have to live with them. The thought that she'd been caught in Neverland with no way to return was so awful, she couldn't help crying.

Peter shrugged and turned to the boys. "Girls!" he said with real disgust.

"All Wendys!" they shouted back at him.

Darla wiped her eyes, and spoke right to Peter. "My name is not Wendy," she said clearly. "It's Darla."

Peter looked at her, and there was nothing nice or laughing or young about his eyes. They were dark and cold and very very old. Darla shivered.

"Here you're a Wendy," he said.

And with that, the dark place where Tink had disappeared grew increasingly light, as a door opened and fifteen girls carrying trays piled high with cakes, cookies, biscuits, buns, and other kinds of goodies marched single file into the hall. They were led by a tall, slender, pretty girl with brown hair that fell straight to her shoulders.

The room suddenly smelled overpoweringly of that sickly sweetness of children's birthday parties at school, when their mothers brought in sloppy cupcakes greasy with icing. Darla shuddered.

"Welcome Feast!" shouted the boy who was closest to the door.

"Welcome Feast!" they all shouted, laughing and gathering around a great center table.

Only Darla seemed to notice that not one of the Wendys was smiling.



HE FEAST WENT ON FOR AGES, because each of the boys had to stand up and give a little speech. Of course, most of them only said, "Welcome Wendy!" and "Glad to meet you!" before sitting down again. A few elaborated a little bit more. But Peter more than made up for it with a long, rambling talk about duty

and dessert and how no one loved them out in the World Above as much as he did here in Neverneverland, and how the cakes proved that.

The boys cheered and clapped at each of Peter's pronouncements, and threw buns and scones across the table at one another as a kind of punctuation. Tink circled Peter's head continuously like a crown of stars, though she never really settled.

But the girls, standing behind the boys like banquet waitresses, did not applaud. Rather they shifted from foot to foot, looking alternately apprehensive and bored. One no more than four years old kept yawning behind a chubby hand.

After a polite bite of an apple tart, which she couldn't swallow but spit into her napkin, Darla didn't even try to pretend. The little pie had been much too sweet, not tart at all. And even though Peter kept urging her between the welcomes to eat something, she just couldn't. That small rebellion seemed to annoy him enormously and he stood up once again, this time on the tabletop, to rant on about how some people lacked gratitude, and how difficult it was to provide for so many, especially with *Him* about.

Peter never actually looked at Darla as he spoke, but she knew — and everyone else knew — that he meant *she* was the ungrateful one. That bothered her some, but not as much as it might have. She even found herself enjoying the fact that he was annoyed, and that realization almost made her smile.

When Peter ended with "No more Feasts for them with Bad Attitudes!" the boys leaped from their benches and overturned the big table, mashing the remaining food into the floor. Then they

all disappeared, diving down a variety of bolt-holes, with Tink after them, leaving the girls alone in the big candlelit room.

"Now see what you've done," said the oldest girl, the pretty one with the straight brown hair. Obviously the leader of the Wendys, she wore a simple dark dress — *like a uniform*, Darla thought, *a school uniform that's badly stained*. "It's going to take forever to get that stuff off the floor. Ages and ages. Mops and buckets. And nothing left for us to eat."

The other girls agreed loudly.

"They made the mess," Darla said sensibly. "Let them clean it up! That's how it's done at my house."

There was a horrified silence. For a long moment none of the girls said a word, but their mouths opened and shut like fish on beaches. Finally the littlest one spoke.

"Peter won't like it."

"Well, I don't like Peter!" Darla answered quickly. "He's nothing but a long-winded bully."

"But," said the little Wendy, "you gave him a thimble." She actually said "simble."

"No," Darla said. "Peter lied. I didn't."

The girls all seemed dumbstruck by that revelation. Without a word more, they began to clean the room, first righting the table and then laboriously picking up what they could with their fingers before resorting, at last, to the dreaded buckets and mops. Soon the place smelled like any institution after a cleaning, like a school bathroom or a hospital corridor, Lysol-fresh with an overcast of pine.

Shaking her head, Darla just watched them until the littlest Wendy handed her a mop.

Darla flung the mop to the floor. "I won't do it," she said. "It's not fair."

The oldest Wendy came over to her and put her hand on Darla's shoulder. "Who ever told you that life is fair?" she asked. "Certainly not a navy, nor an upstairs maid, nor a poor man trying to feed his family."

"Nor my da," put in one of the girls. She was pale skinned, sharp nosed, gap toothed, homely to a fault. "He allas said life was a crapshoot and all usn's got was snake-eyes."

"And not my father," said another, a whey-faced, doughy-looking eight-year-old. "He used to always say that the world didn't treat him right."

"What I mean is that it's not fair that *they* get to have the adventures and you get to clean the house," Darla explained carefully.

"Who will clean it if we don't?" Wendy asked. She picked up the mop and handed it back to Darla. "Not them. Not ever. So if we want it done, we do it. Fair is not the matter here." She went back to her place in the line of girls mopping the floor.

With a sigh that was less a capitulation and more a show of solidarity with the Wendys, Darla picked up a mop and followed.

WHEN THE ROOM WAS SET TO RIGHTS AGAIN, THE WENDYS — WITH Darla following close behind — tromped into the kitchen, a cheerless, windowless room they had obviously tried to make homey. There were little stick dolies stuck in every possible niche and hand-painted birch bark signs on the wall.

SMILE, one sign said, YOU ARE ON CANDIED CAMERA. And another: WENDYS ARE WONDERFUL. A third, in very childish script, read: WENDYS ARE WINNERS. Darla wondered idly if that were meant to be WINNERS or WHINERS, but she decided not to ask.

Depressing as the kitchen was, it was redolent with bakery smells that seemed to dissipate the effect of a prison. Darla sighed, remembering her own kitchen at home, with the windows overlooking her mother's herb garden and the rockery where four kinds of heather flowered till the first snows of winter.

The girls all sat down — on the floor, on the table, in little bumpy, woody niches. There were only two chairs in the kitchen, a tatty overstuffed chair whose gold brocade covering had seen

much better days, and a rocker. The rocker was taken by the oldest Wendy; the other chair remained empty.

At last, seeing that no one else was going to claim the stuffed chair, Darla sat down on it, and a collective gasp went up from the girls.

"A's Peter's chair," the littlest one finally volunteered.

"Well, Peter's not here to sit in it," Darla said. But she did not relax back against the cushion, just in case he should suddenly appear.

"I'm hungry, Wendy," said one of the girls, who had two gold braids down to her waist. "Isn't there *anything* left to eat?" She addressed the girl in the rocker.

"You are always hungry, Madja," Wendy said. But she smiled, and it was a smile of such sweetness, Darla was immediately reminded of her mom, in the days before the divorce and her dad's new wife.

So you *do* have names, and not just Wendy," Darla said.

They looked at her as if she were stupid.

"Like it or not, Miss Management, the Lost Girls are going out on strike."

"Of course we have names," said the girl in the rocker. "I'm the only one truly named Wendy. But I've been here from the first. So that's what Peter calls us. That's Madja," she said, pointing to the girl with the braids. "And that's Lizzy." The youngest girl. "And that's Martha, Pansy, Nina, Nancy, Heidi, Betsy, Maddy, JoAnne, Shula, Annie, Corrie, Barbara . . ." She went around the circle of girls.

Darla interrupted. "Then why doesn't Peter —"
"Because he can't be bothered remembering," said Wendy. "And we can't be bothered reminding him."

"And it's all right," said Madja. "Really, He has so much else to worry about. Like"

"Him!" They all breathed the word together quietly, as if saying it aloud would summon the horror to them.

"Him? You mean Hook, don't you?" asked Darla. "Captain Hook."

The look they gave her was compounded of anger and alarm. Little Lizzy put her hands over her mouth as if she had said the name herself.

"Well, isn't it?"

"You are an extremely stupid girl," said Wendy. "As well as a dangerous one." Then she smiled again that luminous smile at all the other girls, excluding Darla, as if Wendy had not just said something that was both rude and horrible. "Now, darlings, how many of you are as hungry as Madja?"

One by one, the hands went up, Lizzy's first. Only Darla kept her hand down and her eyes down as well.

"Not hungry in the slightest?" Wendy asked, and everyone went silent.

Darla felt forced to look up and saw that Wendy's eyes were staring at her, glittering strangely in the candlelight.

It was too much. Darla shivered and then, all of a sudden, she

wanted to get back at Wendy, who seemed as much of a bully as Peter, only in a softer, sneakier way. *But how to do it?* And then she recalled how her mom said that telling a story in a very quiet voice always made a jury lean forward to concentrate that much more. *Maybe, Darla thought, I could try that.*

"I remember . . ." Darla began quietly. ". . . I remember a story my mom read to me about a Greek girl who was stolen away by the king of the underworld. He tricked her into eating six seeds and so she had to remain in the underworld six months of every year because of them."

The girls had all gone quiet and were clearly listening. *It works!* Darla thought.

"Don't be daft," Wendy said, her voice loud with authority.

"But Wendy, I remember that story, too," said the whey-faced girl, Nancy, in a kind of whisper, as if by speaking quietly she could later deny having said anything at all.

"And I," put in Madja, in a similarly whispery voice.

"And the fairies," said Lizzy. She was much too young to worry about loud or soft, so she spoke in her normal tone of voice. "If you eat anything in their hall, my mum *allas* said . . . you never get to go home again. Not ever. I miss my mum." Quite suddenly she began to cry.

"Now see what you've done," said Wendy, standing and stamping her foot. Darla was shocked. She'd never seen anyone over four years old do such a thing. "They'll all be blubbing now, remembering their folks, even the ones who'd been badly beaten at home or worse. And not a sticky bun left to comfort them with. You — girl — ought to be ashamed!"

"Well, it isn't my fault!" said Darla, loudly, but she stood, too. The thought of Wendy towering over her just now made her feel edgy and even a bit afraid. "And my names isn't *girl*. It's Darla!"

They glared at one another.

Just then there was a brilliant whistle. A flash of light circled the kitchen like a demented firefly.

"It's Tink!" Lizzy cried, clapping her hands together. "Oh! Oh! It's the signal. 'Larm! Larm!'"

"Come on, you lot," Wendy cried. "Places, all." She turned her back to Darla, grabbed up a soup ladle, and ran out of the room.

Each of the girls picked up one of the kitchen implements and followed. Not to be left behind, Darla pounced on the only thing left, a pair of silver sugar tongs, and pounded out after them.

They didn't go far, just to the main room again. There they stood silent guard over the bolt-holes. After a while — not quite fifteen minutes, Darla guessed — Tink fluttered in with a more melodic *all clear* and the boys slowly slid back down into the room.

Peter was the last to arrive.

"Oh, Peter, we were so worried," Wendy said.

The other girls crowded around. "We were scared silly," Madja added.

"Weepers!" cried Nancy.

"Knees all knocking," added JoAnne.

"Oh, this is really *too* stupid for words!" Darla said. "All we did was stand around with kitchen tools. Was I suppose to brain a pirate with these?" She held out the sugar tongs as she spoke.

The hush that followed her outcry was enormous. Without another word, Peter disappeared back into the dark. One by one, the Lost Boys followed him. Tink was the last to go, flickering out like a candle in the wind.

"Now," said Madja with a pout, "we won't even get to hear about the fight. And it's the very best part of being a Wendy."

Darla stared at the girls for a long moment. "What you all need," she said grimly, "is a backbone transplant." And when no one responded, she added, "It's clear the Wendys need to go out on strike." Being the daughter of a labor lawyer had its advantages. She knew all about strikes.

"What the Wendys need," Wendy responded sternly, "is to give the cupboards a good shaking-out." She patted her hair down and looked daggers at Darla. "But first, cups of tea all 'round."

Turning on her heel, she started back toward the kitchen. Only four girls remained behind.

Little Lizzy crept over to Darla's side. "What's a strike?" she asked.

"Work stoppage," Darla said. "Signs and lines."

Nancy, Martha, and JoAnne, who had also stayed to listen, looked equally puzzled.

"Signs?" Nancy said.

"Lines?" JoAnne said.

"Hello . . ." Darla couldn't help the exasperation in her voice. "What year do you all live in? I mean, haven't you ever heard of strikes? Watched CNN? Endured social studies?"

"Nineteen fourteen," said Martha.

"Nineteen thirty-three," said Nancy.

"Nineteen seventy-two," said JoAnne.

"Do you mean to say that none of you are . . ." Darla couldn't think of what to call it, so added lamely, "new?"

Lizzy slipped her hand into Darla's. "You are the onliest new Wendy we've had in years."

"Oh," Darla said. "I guess that explains it." But she wasn't sure.

"Explains what?" they asked. Before Darla could answer, Wendy called from the kitchen doorway. "Are you lot coming? Tea's on." She did not sound as if she were including Darla in the invitation.

Martha scurried to Wendy's side, but Nancy and JoAnne hesitated a moment before joining her. That left only Lizzy with Darla.

"Can I help?" Lizzy asked. "For the signs. And the 'ines? I be a good worker. Even Wendy says so."

"You're my only . . ." Darla said, smiling down at her and giving her little hand a squeeze. "My onliest worker. Still, as my mom always says, Start with one, you're halfway done."

Lizzy repeated the rhyme. "Start with one, you're halfway done. Start with one..."

"Just remember it. No need to say it aloud," Darla said.

Lizzy looked up at her, eyes like sky blue marbles. "But I like the way that poem sounds."

"Then like it quietly. We have a long way to go yet before we're ready for any chants." Darla went into the kitchen hand-in-hand

with Lizzy, who skipped beside her, mouthing the words silently.

FOURTEEN WENDYS STARED AT them. Not a one was smiling. Each had a teacup — unmatched, chipped, or cracked — in her hand.

"A long way to go where?" Wendy asked in a chilly voice.

"A long way before you can be free of this yoke of oppression," said Darla. *Yoke of oppression* was a favorite expression of her mother's.

"We are not yoked," Wendy said slowly. "And we are not oppressed."

"What's o-ppressed?" asked Lizzy.

"Made to do what you don't want to do," explained Darla, but she never took her eyes off of Wendy. "Treated harshly. Ruled unjustly. Governed with cruelty." Those were the three definitions she'd had to memorize for her last social studies exam. She never thought she'd actually get to use them in the real world. *If, she thought suddenly, this world is real.*

"No one treats us harshly or rules us unjustly. And the only cruel ones in Neverland are the pirates," Wendy explained carefully, as if talking to someone feeble-minded or slow.

None of the other Wendys said a word. Most of them stared into their cups, a little — Darla thought — like the way I always stare down at my shoes when Mom or Dad want to talk about something that hurts.

Lizzy pulled her hand from Darla's. "I think it harsh that we

always have to clean up after the boys." Her voice was tiny but still it carried.

"And unjust," someone put in.

"Who said that?" Wendy demanded, staring around the table.

"Who dares to say that Peter is unjust?"

Darla pursed her lips, wondering how her mom would answer such a question. She was about to lean forward to say something when JoAnne stood in a rush.

"I said it. And it is unjust. I came to Neverland to get away from that sort of thing. Well . . . and to get away from my stepfather, too," she said. "I mean, I don't mind cleaning up my own mess. And even someone else's occasionally. But . . ." She sat down as quickly as she had stood, looking accusingly into her cup, as if the cup had spoken and not she.

"Well!" Wendy said, sounding so much like Darla's homeec teacher that Darla had to laugh out loud.

As if the laugh freed them, the girls suddenly stood up one after another, voicing complaints. And as each one rose, little Lizzy clapped her hands and skipped around the table, chanting, "Start with one, you're halfway done! Start with one, you're halfway done!"

Darla didn't say a word more. She didn't have to. She just listened as the first trickle of angry voices became a stream and the stream turned into a flood. The girls spoke of the boys' mess and being underappreciated and wanting a larger share of the food. They spoke about needing to go outside every once in a while. They spoke of longing for new stockings and a bathing room all to themselves, not one shared with the boys, who left rings around the tub and dirty underwear everywhere. They spoke of the long hours and the lack of fresh air, and Barbara said they really could use every other Saturday off, at least. It seemed once they started complaining they couldn't stop.

Darla's mom would have understood what had just happened, but Darla was clearly as stunned as Wendy by the rush of demands. They stared at one another, almost like comrades.

The other girls kept on for long minutes, each one stumbling over the next to be heard, until the room positively rocked with complaints. And then, as suddenly as they had begun, they stopped. Red faced, they all sat down again, except for Lizzy, who still capered around the room, but now did it wordlessly.

Into the sudden silence, Wendy rose. "How could you . . ." she began. She leaned over the table, clutching the top, her entire body trembling. "After all Peter has done for you, taking you in when no one else wanted you, when you had been tossed aside by the world, when you'd been crushed and corrupted and canceled. How could you?"

Lizzy stopped skipping in front of Darla. "Is it time for signs and 'ines now?" she asked, her marble-blue eyes wide.

Darla couldn't help it. She laughed again. Then she held out her arms to Lizzy who cuddled right in. "Time indeed," Darla said. She looked up at Wendy. "Like it or not, Miss Management, the Lost Girls are going out on strike."

WENDY SAT IN HER ROCKER, ARMS FOLDED, A SCOWL ON HER FACE. She looked like a four-year-old having a temper tantrum. But of course it was something worse than that.

The girls ignored her. They threw themselves into making signs with a kind of manic energy and in about an hour they had a whole range of them, using the backs of their old signs, pages torn from cookbooks, and flattened flour bags.

WENDYS WON'T WORK, one read. EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK, went another. MY NAME'S NOT WENDY! said a third, and FRESH AIR IS ONLY FAIR a fourth. Lizzy's sign was decorated with stick figures carrying what Darla took to be swords, or maybe wands. Lizzy had spelled out — or rather misspelled out — what became the girls' marching words: WE AIN'T LOST, WE'RE JUST MIZ-PLAYST.

It turned out that JoAnne was musical. She made up lyrics

to the tune of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" and taught them to the others:

*We ain't lost, we're just misplaced,
The outside foe we've never faced.
Give us a chance to fight and win
And we'll be sure to keep Neverland neat as a pin.*

The girls argued for a while over the last line, which Betsy said had too many syllables and the wrong sentiment, until Magda suggested, rather timidly, that if they actually wanted a chance to fight the pirates, maybe the boys should take a turn at cleaning the house. "Fair's fair," she added.

That got a cheer. "Fair's fair," they told one another, and Patsy scrawled that sentiment on yet another sign.

The cheer caused Wendy to get up grumpily from her chair and leave the kitchen in a snit. She must have called for the boys then, because no sooner had the girls decided on an amended line (which still had too many syllables but felt right otherwise)

And you can keep Neverland neat as a pin!

than the boys could be heard coming back noisily into the dining room. They shouted and whistled and banged their fists on the table, calling out for the girls and for food. Tink's high-pitched cry overrode the noise, piercing the air. The girls managed to ignore it all until Peter suddenly appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"What's this I hear?" he said, smiling slightly to show he was more amused than angry. Somehow that only made his face seem both sinister and untrustworthy.

But his appearance in the doorway was electrifying. For a moment not one of the girls could speak. It was as if they had all taken a collective breath and were waiting to see which of them had the courage to breathe out first.

Then Lizzy held up her sign. "We're going on strike," she said brightly.

"And what, little Wendy, is that?" Peter asked, leaning forward and speaking in the kind of voice grown-ups use with children. He pointed at her sign. "Is it . . ." he said slyly, "like a thimble?"

"Silly Peter," said Lizzy, "it's signs and 'ines."

"I see the signs, all right," said Peter. "But what do they mean? WENDYS WON'T WORK. Why, Neverland counts on Wendys working. And I count on it, too. You Wendys are the most important part of what we have made here."

"Oh," said Lizzy, turning to Darla, her face shining with pleasure. "We're the most important . . ."

Darla sighed heavily. "If you are so important, Lizzy, why can't he remember your name? If you're so important, why do you have all the work and none of the fun?"

"Right!" cried JoAnne suddenly, and immediately burst into her song. It was picked up at once by the other girls. Lizzy, caught up in the music, began to march in time all around the table with her sign. The others, still singing, fell in line behind her. They marched once around the kitchen and then right out into the dining room. Darla was at the rear.

At first the Lost Boys were stunned at the sight of the girls and their signs. Then they, too, got caught up in the song and began to pound their hands on the table in rhythm.

Tink flew around and around Wendy's head, flickering on and off and on angrily, looking for all the world like an electric hair-cutting machine. Peter glared at them all until he suddenly seemed to come to some conclusion. Then he leaped onto the dining room table, threw back his head, and crowed loudly.

At that everyone went dead silent. Even Tink.

Peter let the silence prolong itself until it was almost painful. At last he turned and addressed Darla and, through her, all the girls. "What is it you want?" he asked. "What is it you truly want? Because you'd better be careful what you ask for. In Neverland wishes are granted in very strange ways."

"It's not," Darla said carefully, "what I want. It's what they want."

In a tight voice, Wendy cried out, "They never wanted for anything until she came, Peter. They never needed or asked . . ."

"We want . . ." JoAnne interrupted, "to be equals."

Peter wheeled about on the table and stared down at JoAnne and she, poor thing, turned grey under his gaze. "No one is asking you," he said pointedly.

"We want to be equals!" Lizzy shouted. "To the boys. To Peter!"

The dam burst again, and the girls began shouting and singing and crying and laughing all together "Equal . . . equal . . . equal . . ."

Even the boys took it up.

Tink flickered frantically, then took off up one of the bolt-holes, emerging almost immediately down another, her piercing alarm signal so loud that everyone stopped chanting, except for Lizzy, whose little voice only trailed off after a bit.

"So," said Peter, "you want equal share in the fighting? Then here's your chance."

Tink's light was sputtering with excitement and she whistled nonstop.

"Tink says Hook's entire crew is out there, waiting. And, boy! are they angry. You want to fight them? Then go ahead." He crossed his arms over his chest and turned his face away from the girls. "I won't stop you."

No longer grey but now pink with excitement, JoAnne grabbed up a knife from the nearest Lost Boy. "I'm not afraid!" she said. She headed up one of the bolt-holes.

Weaponless, Barbara, Pansy, and Betsy followed right after.

"But that's not what I meant them to do," Darla said. "I mean, weren't we supposed to work out some sort of compromise?"

Peter turned back slowly and looked at Darla, his face stern and unforgiving. "I'm Peter Pan. I don't have to compromise in Neverland." Wendy reached up to help him off the tabletop.

The other girls had already scattered up the holes, and only Lizzy was left. And Darla.

"Are you coming to fight?" Lizzy asked Darla, holding out her hand.

Darla gulped and nodded. They walked to the bolt-hole hand-in-hand. Darla wasn't sure what to expect, but they began rising up as if in some sort of air elevator. Behind them one of the boys was whining to Peter, "But what are we going to do without them?"

The last thing Darla heard Peter say was, "Don't worry. There are always more Wendys where they came from."



THE AIR OUTSIDE WAS CRISP and autumny and smelled of apples. There was a full moon, orange and huge. *Harvest moon*, Darla thought, which was odd since it had been spring in her bedroom.

Ahead she saw the other girls. *And the pirates.* Or at least she saw their silhouettes. It obviously hadn't been

much of a fight. The smallest of the girls — Martha, Nina, and Heidi — were already captured and riding atop their captors' shoulders. The others — with the exception of JoAnne — were being carried off fireman-style. JoAnne still had her knife and she was standing off one of the largest of the men; she got in one good swipe before being disarmed, and lifted up.

Darla was just digesting this when Lizzy was pulled from her.

"Up you go, little darlin'," came a deep voice.

Lizzy screamed. "Wendy! Wendy!"

Darla had no time to answer her before she, too, was gathered up in enormous arms and carted off.

In less time than it takes to tell of it, they were through the woods and over a shingle, dumped into boats, and rowed out to the pirate ship. They were hauled up by ropes and — except for Betsy, who struggled so hard she landed in the water and had to

Continued on page 39

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PROLOGUE

The one-eyed black cat called Majicou sat between a rusting cage and two sacks of stale grain on a shelf at the top of a shop on Cutting Lane.

He had positioned himself with care; of the shop's inhabitants, only the spiders he had dispossessed were sure he was there. He seemed to be asleep among the shadows and soft grey cobwebs. But his one eye was half-open, and from it he had a hunter's line of sight through the shop to the street door, where small rippled-glass windows admitted just enough weak afternoon light to illuminate a stock of leather collars, tartan-lined wicker baskets, and gaudy paper sacks of dried animal feed. Among this poor stuff, a human being moved clumsily about its business in a cloud of disturbed dust. It seemed to Majicou as tired and greedy as most of its kind; it seemed as ill as they all were, on the bad air and bad food they had made for themselves. Majicou watched it idly for a moment as it pushed a rat's nest of straw, torn paper, and spilled fish food round the old wooden floor with a broom.

Unless their affairs touched his, the black cat had no interest in human beings. He sat on his shelf as still as a stone, and half his mind was somewhere else. (There, fires broke out, there were cries of terror both human and feline, he was responsible and not responsible: it was long ago but no so far away.) The other half was on the shop—where, despite the gloom, nothing escaped him. If his cold eye could not penetrate, his whiskers mapped the air currents instead; and his nose was full of the thick, complex smell of imprisoned animals: "pets," reeking of their own pent-up energy and tired resignation. Fish swam round their tanks in circles. Mice and rabbits crouched listlessly in heaps of straw. A cage of finches filled the shop with sad electrical peeps and chirps.

There was a single kitten in a wire pen. At sixteen weeks, he was already a little old to sell easily.

He was too big. He had lost the awkward delight of the very young, the appearance of a charmed life, the mixture of fragility and iron, timidity and courage. Nevertheless, he was still striking, with lambent, shocking green eyes set in a sharp, intelligent, oriental face. He had enough energy for every other animal in the shop. His fur, creamy white beneath, shaded above to an almost metallic grey. When he paced his cage his thick-piled coat seemed to shift and ripple restlessly in the gloom, emphasizing each muscle and movement; polished by passing gleams of light, it leapt out silver to the watching eye. There were faint grey tiger-stripes high up on his forelegs, and a darker stripe ran the length of his spine. Did this reflect a darker stripe to his character? Majicou hoped so; but before he let things go further he had to find out. He would not call the kitten by its true name until he knew.

Let someone else name it until then.

Oblivious of his decision, the kitten climbed to the top of his pen, and, clinging to the wire with powerful little claws, fixed a determined eye on the cage of finches across the aisle. The finches scolded. The kitten glowered at them in a predatory fashion, and made strange clicking noises under his breath.

The black cat watched.

Suddenly, the shop-bell rang. Two humans, a male and female, came in from Cutting Lane. The shopkeeper glanced up into the shadows for a moment, then rested its broom against the counter and approached them.

Human beings were as shadowy to Majicou as he was to them. But in his lifetime—which was long—he had watched them come and go, and come and go, and he knew their qualities. This pair were young and nervous—he could smell it on them—a little disoriented by the darkness of

the shop. They were cheerful, harmless, well provided for, and keen to share their luck. They were eager to adopt. The moment they saw the kitten, they forgot everything else. This suited perfectly his design: they would fulfill the kitten's needs until Majicou was ready for him. Nevertheless, the black cat watched exasperatedly as, through body languages of need and self-deception, all the age-old misunderstandings and betrayals enacted themselves again.

The male poked its fingers into the pen to attract the kitten's attention. It made a noise at the back of its soft palate, "Cs cs cs." The female laughed. At first, obsessed by the finches, the kitten ignored them both. Then, jumping down as if he had grown bored with what he couldn't have, he strutted over, stiff-legged, tail up, cocky and curious and full of himself, to have a look. Ambushed by the beauty of his wild barred face and huge green eyes, the female gaped in delight.

Seeing this, the shopkeeper smiled a complex smile, deftly opened the pen, and scooped the kitten out into the female's waiting arms.

For his part, the kitten sat still and stared intently at the two huge faces that loomed above him. His nose was full of possibilities. He sensed great positive change. He began to purr. His purr was like a great soft engine that trembled through his warm white pelt into the woman's arms, from his bones to her bones. "Take me with you," said the purr. "Take me with you. A fine home, and room to roam! Take me there and feed me sardines. Game casserole. Beef and kidney. Tuna in brine!" The kitten rolled over to display his pure white belly. "Look! Take me home!"

(Majicou viewed this performance empty. "Charm them now," he thought. "Charm them well. But how will you help yourself when they have charmed you in return?")

The silver kitten wriggled and purred.

Fifteen minutes later, he was leaving his prison forever, riding in a large wicker basket.

The shopkeeper stood like a wound-down toy for a moment, watching them go off along the empty street. Then, the smile fading suddenly from its face, it backed into the shop, shut the door, and peered out between advertisements—dog food shaped like a bone, cat food shaped like a bird. It

reached up with its free hand, changed the sign from OPEN to CLOSED.

Then, without warning, every animal in the shop seemed to go mad.

Finches hopped from perch to perch, filling the air with shrieks and whistles of alarm. Noses twitching, the fat hamsters and guinea pigs stared in panic through their bars, then buried themselves as fast as they could in their straw. The Belgian rabbits turned their backs, as if this gesture could render them invisible. Even the fish seemed agitated, flickering through the bubbles in their water worlds.

The shopkeeper turned to see what was the matter. Its broom clattered to the floor. It stared wildly around and seemed to be about to say something, deny something, apologize for something. Instead, for no apparent reason, it opened the street door again. The one-eyed black cat slipped out into Cutting Lane.





THE GREAT OUTDOORS

"Among human beings a cat is merely a cat; among cats a cat is a prowling shadow in a jungle."

—Karel Čapek

They called the kitten Tag. They fed him, and he grew. They put a collar around his neck. They entertained him, and the world began to take on shape.

It was his world, full of novelty yet always reliable; exciting yet secure. He was a small king; and by the time a week was out, he had explored every inch of his new kingdom. He liked the kitchen best. It was warm in there on a cold day, and from the windowsill he could see out into the garden. In the kitchen they made food, which was easy to get off them. He had bowls of his own to eat it from. He had a box of clean dirt to scratch in. The kitchen wasn't entirely comfortable (especially in the mornings, when things went off or went round very loudly without warning): but elsewhere they had given him a large sofa, covered in dark red velvet, among the scattered cushions of which he scrambled and burrowed and slept. He had brass tubs with plants in them, and some very interesting fireplaces full of dried flowers, out of which flowed odors damp and sooty.

Up a flight of stairs and into every room, every cupboard and corner! It was big up there, and full of unattended human things. At first he wouldn't go on his own, but always made one of them accompany him while he inspected the shelves stuffed with clean linen and dusty books.

"Come on, come on!" he urged them. "Here now! Look, here!" They never answered.

They were too dull.

A further flight up, and it was as if nobody had ever lived there. Echoes on the uncarpeted stairs; grey floorboards and open doors; pale bright light pouring in through uncurtained windows. Up

there, each bare floor had a smell of its own; each ball of fluff had a personality: if he listened, he could hear dead spiders contracting behind the woodwork. Left to himself up there he danced, for reasons he barely understood. It was a territorial dance, grave yet full of energy. Simply to occupy the space, perhaps, he leapt and pounced and hurled himself about, then slept in a pool of sunshine as if someone had switched him off. When he woke, the sun had moved away, and they were calling him to come and eat more new things.

They called him Tag. He called them dull.

"Come on, dulls!" he urged. "Come on!"

They had a room where they poured water on themselves. Every morning he hid outside it and jumped out on the big dull bare feet that passed. Nice but dull, they were never quick enough or nimble enough to avoid him. They never learned. They remained shadowy to him—a large smell, cheerful if meaningless goings-on, a quadrant of a caring face suspended over him like the moon through the window if he woke afraid. They remained patient, amiable, easily convinced, less focused than a tin of meat-and-liver dinner. The dulls were for food or comfort or play. Especially for play. One of his earliest memories was of chasing soap bubbles. The light of an autumn evening shifted gently from blue to deep orange. Up and down the room rushed Tag, clapping his front paws in the air. Everything was exciting. Everything was golden. The iridescence of each bubble was a brand new world, a brand new opportunity. It was like waking up in the morning.

"Bubble!" Tag thought. "Another bubble!"

He thought: "Chase the bubbles!"

As leggy and unsteady, as easily surprised, as easy

to tease, as full of daft energy as every kitten, Tag pursued the bubbles, and the bubbles—each with its tiny reflected picture of the room in strange, slippery colors—evaded him smoothly and neatly, and then hid among a sheaf of dried flowers, or floated slowly up the chimney, or blundered without a care into a piece of furniture and burst. He heard them burst, in a way a human being never could, with a sound like tapped porcelain.

Evanesence and infinite renewal!

Any cat who wants to live forever should watch bubbles. Only kittens should chase them.

Tag would chase anything. But the toy he enjoyed most was a small cloth mouse with a very energetic odor. It had been bright red to start with. Now it was rather dirty, and to its original smell had been added that of floor polish. Tag whacked it round the shiny living room floor. Off it skidded. Tag skidded after it, scrabbling to keep upright on the tighter turns.

One day he found a real mouse hiding under the Welsh dresser.

A real mouse was a different thing.

Tag could see it, a little pointed black shape against the grey dimness. He could smell it too, sharp and terrified against the customary smell of fluffballs and seasoned pine. It knew he was there! It kept very still, but there was a lick of light off one beady eye, and he could feel the thoughts racing and racing through its tiny head. All the mouse's fear was trapped there under the dresser, stretched taut between the two of them like a wire. Tag vibrated with it. He wanted to chase and pounce. He wanted to eat the mouse. He didn't want to eat it. He felt powerful and predatory, he felt bigger than himself; at the same time he was anxious and frightened, for himself and the mouse. Eating someone was such a big step. He rather regretted his bravado with the pet shop finches.

He watched the mouse for some time. It watched him. Suddenly Tag decided not to change either of their lives. His old cloth mouse had a nicer smell anyway. He reached in expertly, hooked it out and walked away with it in his jaws. "Got you!" he told it. He flung it into the air and caught it. After a few minutes he had forgotten the real mouse, though it probably never forgot him—and his dreams were

never the same. That afternoon he took the cloth mouse with him up to the third floor where he could pat it about in a drench of cool light.

When he got bored with this he jumped up on the windowsill. From there he had a view of the gardens stretching away right and left between the houses. However much he cajoled or bullied them, the dells never seemed to understand that he wanted to go out there. It fascinated him. His own garden had a lawn full of moss and clover which sloped down towards the house, where a steep rockery gave way to the lichen-stained tiles of the checker-board patio. Lime trees overhung the back fence, along which—almost obscured by colonies of cotoneaster, montebretia and fuchsia—ran a dark, narrow path of crazy paving. Cool smells came up from the garden after rain. Wood pigeons shifted furtively in the branches all the endless sunny afternoon, then burst into loud, aimless cooing. At twilight, the sleepy liquid call of blackbird and thrush seemed to come from another world; and the greens of the lawn looked mysterious and unreal. Dawn filled the trees with squirrels, who chased each other from branch to branch, looting as they went; while birds quartered the lawn or hopped in circles round the mossy stone birdbath.

Transfixed with excitement, Tag would watch them pull up worms.

That afternoon, a magpie was in blatant possession of the lawn, strutting around the birdbath and every so often emitting loud and raucous cries. It was a big, glossy bird, proud of its elegant black and white livery and metallic blue flashes. Tag had seen it before. He hated its bobbing head and powerful, ugly beak. He hated its flat, ironic eye. Most of all he hated the way it seemed to look directly up at him, as if to say—"My lawn!"

Tag narrowed his eyes. Angry chattering sounds he couldn't control came from his throat. He jumped off the windowsill then back up again. "Wrong!" he said. "Wrong!"

But the bird pretended not to hear him (though he was certain it could), and unable to bear its smug proprietorial air, Tag sat down, curled his tail round himself and closed his eyes. After a while he fell asleep, thinking confusedly, "My mouse." This seemed to lead him into a dream—

He dreamed that he was under the Welsh dresser,

eating something. Somehow the dark gap beneath the dresser was big enough for him to enter; he had followed something in there and was eating it. The soft parts had a warm, acrid, salty taste and he could hardly get them down fast enough. Before he was able to swallow the tougher bits he had to shear them with the carnassial teeth at the side of his jaw, breathing heavily through his mouth as he did so. That was enjoyable too. Just as he was finishing off—licking his lips, snuffing the dusty floor where it had been in case he had missed anything—he heard a voice in the dark whisper quite close to him, “Tag is not your true name.”

He whirled round. Nothing. Yet someone was there under the dresser with him. He could almost feel the heat of its body, the smell of its breath, the unsettling companionable feel of it there. It had quietly watched him eat and said nothing. Now he felt guilty, angry, afraid. His fur bristled. He tried to back out from under the dresser, but now everything was the right size again and he was stuck, squeezed down tight in a dark space that smelled of wood and dust and blood with a creature he couldn’t see. “Tag,” it whispered, “listen. Tag is not your true name.” He felt that if he stayed there any longer, it would push his face right into his, touch him in the dark, tell him something he didn’t want to hear—“Tag is my name!” he cried, and woke up—to a loud, rapid hammering noise near his ear. While he slept, the magpie had flown up from the garden. It was strutting to and fro on the ledge directly outside the window, screeching and cawing, flapping its wings against the glass, filling the whole world with its clamor. Now its face was right next to his own, and its chipped, wicked beak was drumming against the glass and it was shouting at him—“Call yourself a cat? Call yourself a cat?”—and he fell off the windowsill and hit his head hard on the floor.

Everything went a soft dark brown color, like comforting fur. When he woke up again, the bird was gone and he could hear the dells preparing their food downstairs and he thought it had all been the same dream.

Tag had lived in the house for two months. It seemed much longer, a great stretch of time in which he had never been unhappy. He had never wanted for anything. He had doubled in size. His sleep had been sound, his dreams infrequent and full of kitten things. All that seemed to be changing. Now, as he curled up on the velvet sofa, he

wondered what would happen when he closed his eyes. Each time he slept, he lived another life, or fragments of it, a life of which he had no understanding—

In one dream he was walking beneath a sliver of yellow moon, with ragged clouds high up; he heard the loud roar of some distant animal. In another, he saw the vague shape of two cats huddled together with heads bowed, waiting in the pouring rain; they were so hungry and in such trouble that, when he saw them, a grief he could not understand welled up inside him like a pain. In a third dream, he was standing on a windswept clifftop high above the sea. There were dark gorse bushes under a strange, unreal light. There was a sense of vast space, the sound of water crashing rhythmically on rocks below. In the teeth of the wind, Tag heard a voice at his side say quietly: “I am one who becomes two; I am two who become four; I am four who become eight; I am one more after that.” It was the voice of a cat. Or was it?

“Tintagel,” it said. “Tag! Tag! Listen to the waves!”

All the dreams were different, but that voice was always the same: quiet, persuasive, companionable, frightening. It wanted to tell him things. It wanted him to do things.

All the dreams were strange, but perhaps this was the strangest dream of all—

He dreamed it was evening, and he was sitting on a windowsill while behind him in the room, the dells ate their food, talking and waving their big arms about. It was dark. There were clouds high up, obscuring the waning moon, but the moonlight broke fitfully through. Something was happening at the very end of the garden. He couldn’t quite see what it was. Every night, he sensed, animals went along the path down there, entering the garden at one side and leaving the other. They were on business of their own, business to enthrall a young cat. It was a highway, with constantly exciting traffic.

In the dream there was an animal out there, but he couldn’t see it clearly, or hear it. For a moment the moonlight seemed to resolve it into the shape of a large black cat—a cat with only one eye. Then it was nothing but a shadow again. He shifted his feet uneasily. He wanted to be out there. He didn’t want to be out there. Clouds obscured the moon again. He put his face close to the glass. “Be quiet!”

he tried to tell the dulls. "Watch! Watch now!"

As he spoke, the animal out there seemed to see him. He felt its eye on him. He felt its will begin to engage his own. He thought he heard it whisper, "I have a task for you, Tag. A great task!"

Behind him in the room, the dulls laughed at something one of them said. Tag shook himself, expecting to wake up. But when he looked around, he was still in that room, and he had never been asleep. As if sensing his confusion, the female got up and, putting her face close to his as if it wanted to see exactly what he was seeing, stared out into the darkness. It shivered. "You don't want to go out there," it said softly. "Cold and dangerous for a little cat like you. Brr!" It stroked his head. The purr rose in Tag's throat.

When he turned back to the garden, the one-eyed cat had gone.

Early one morning, before the household was awake, Tag saw the sun coming up, carmine-colored, flat and pale with promise. A few shreds of mist hung about the branches of the lime trees. Soon, three or four sparrows and a robin had alighted on the lawn and begun hopping about among the fallen leaves. This was all as it should be. Tag hunched forward to get a better look. "My birds!" he thought. But then they flew up suddenly, to be replaced by his enemy the magpie, which strode on long legs in a rough circle round the birdbath, shining with health and self-importance. It stopped, stretched its neck, opened its beak to reveal a short thick purple-grey tongue, and let forth its abrasive cry.

"Raaark. Raaark."

"Oh yes?" thought Tag. "We'll see about that!"

But what could he do? Only jump on and off the windowsill in a fever of frustration. At last he heard the dulls getting up, and there was something else to think about. He raced down the stairs and stood by his bowl in the kitchen.

"Breakfast," he demanded. Chicken and game casserole! "In here. Put it in this bowl. Breakfast." Chicken and game!

That was a smell he would remember later on.

Two minutes after he had got his face into the bowl,

one of the dulls opened the back door without thinking. Tag felt the cool morning air on his nose. It was full of smells. It was full of opportunity. And the magpie was still out there, strutting round the lawn as if he owned it.

"My lawn!" thought Tag. "Breakfast later!"

And he was out in a flash, straight between a pair of legs, across the lawn, scattering leaves and hurling himself at the bird, which turned its sly black head at the last moment, said clearly, "Not this time, sonny," and flew like an arrow through a hole in the fence, leaving one small white body-feather floating in the air behind it. Tag, enraged, went sprinting after, his hind feet digging up lawn and flowerbed. He heard the dulls shouting after him. Then he was through the fence and into the garden next door. The magpie was sitting on a fence, regarding him amusedly from one beady eye. "Raaark." Off they went again. Every time he thought he had caught it, the bird only led him further afield, until, when Tag looked back at his house, he couldn't see it anymore.

He hesitated a moment.

"Call yourself a cat?" sneered the magpie, almost in his ear. "This is where you belong, out here in the wild world—not a toy cat on a windowsill!" But when he whirled round ready to renew the chase, it had vanished into thin air.

Tag sat down and washed himself. He looked around.

New gardens! New gardens that went on forever. Through one and into the next, forever.

"Out!" he thought. "I got out!"



THE AUTHOR "GABRIEL KING"



JANE JOHNSON

As publishing director of Voyager and Tolkien for Harper Collins UK, I worked in the field for nearly fourteen years. Authors I've bought and helped to develop include: Ray Feist, Stan Robinson, Katharine Kerr, Barbara Hambly, Robin Hobb, Michael Marshall Smith, Jack Womack, Geoff Ryman, Colin Greenland, Robert Holdstock, Janny Wurts, Julian May, David Zindell, Guy Gavriel Kay, and, of course, the entire Tolkien list, including the Alan Lee-illustrated editions of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

I live in rural isolation in the beautiful English village of Coleshill, Buckinghamshire—opposite the village duck pond and next to the pub—in a tiny nineteenth-century cottage. I share my home with my partner, Jad, a forester, and my Norwegian Forest Cat, Thorfinna Dorcas Lizzara (Finn). Finn has many grand champions in her pedigree but has no airs and graces; she spends most of her time outdoors hunting and climbing trees. When I'm not editing or tending to the garden, I'm often to be found scaling sea cliffs around the British coast.

Born in 1960 in Cornwall (the ancient country of THE WILD ROAD), I moved to London in 1978 to attend university. I took a First in English, then a master's degree in Old Icelandic, inspired directly by my great love of Tolkien and his fascination with the old languages. After teaching drama at a high school, and working in a betting office and at the deeply eccentric Foyles bookshop, I moved into publishing by mistake, after bumping into my next-door neighbor who worked at George Allen & Unwin (Tolkien's publishers since 1937). Before I knew it, I had landed a PA job for the company.

One of the first authors I worked with was M. John Harrison. We fell for each other in a big way and lived together for nearly ten years, before splitting amicably in 1995. That same year we started working on THE WILD ROAD, and the collaboration has, amazingly, kept us on very good terms, despite the inevitable aesthetic wrangles! We are currently hard at work on the follow-up to THE WILD ROAD, *The Golden Cat*, which will complete this story cycle.

M. JOHN HARRISON (Mike Harrison)

Born in Warwickshire in 1945 under the sign of Leo, he moved to London during the 1960s, where he worked on the controversial and groundbreaking sf magazine *New Worlds* with authors like Michael Moorcock, J. G. Ballard, and Brian Aldiss. He has been a full-time writer all his adult life. His novels include *The Pastel City*, *A Storm of Wings*, *The Centauri Device*, *In Viriconium* (short-listed for the *Guardian Fiction Prize*), *Climbers* (winner of the Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature), and *The Course of the Heart* (published in the United States by Doubleday, Arbor House, and St. Martin's Press). His latest solo novel—*Signs of Life*—is due out from SMP shortly (via Gordon van Gelder) and is a genetics thriller combined with a powerful modern romance. He has had a twenty-year love affair with cats, since rescuing a stray in the 1970s in Camden Town. He currently lives in North London with a gorgeous black-tipped Burmilla cat, who has the embarrassing pedigree name Wychwynd Kojak but is known by friends simply as Iggy (for Iggy Pop—he had so much energy as a kitten that he broke his foot running full-tilt the length of a vast polished wooden floor the very first night we had him). We saw him in a pet shop in the East End after a regular trip to the Mile End Climbing Wall, and despite his price tag (high), we had to save him. He is, of course, Tag, the hero of THE WILD ROAD. Knowing this has made him very vain. It is his photo you see on the front cover of the U.K. edition.

Of course, the real story here is the fact that we managed to break up in such a civilized fashion that not only have we stayed friends (despite breaking up the family home and separating the cats—we each have visiting rights!), but we have also managed to write a long collaborative novel together and remain on speaking terms. Remarkably, also, our respective new partners have coped with this situation without jealousy or difficulty.



NOW FOR THE REAL CELEBRITIES.

Above and below: Wychwynd Kojak
aka Iggy aka Tag



Above: Thorfinna Dorcas Lizzara aka Finn



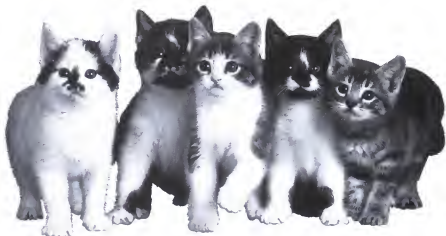
Above: Tag
Below: Finn



Above: The Wild Road



CONJURE YOUR OWN CAT TALE... AND YOU COULD WIN!



Del Rey Books and Sovereign Media announces its *Cat Fantasy Short Story Contest*! To celebrate the wonderful new feline fantasy novel *THE WILD ROAD*, we're inviting all fledgling writers to send us a cat fantasy tale of their own and take a chance at winning a pair of splendid prizes. Stories must be original, never-before-published, and no longer than 7,500 words. All entrants must be over age eighteen, and entries must be postmarked by February 28, 1998.

*F*ive contest winners, chosen by our judges, will receive a copy of Gabriel King's *THE WILD ROAD* autographed by the author, plus a FREE one-year subscription to *Realms of Fantasy*. In addition, the winning stories will be posted on Del Rey's *THE WILD ROAD* Web site! Mail entries (one story per applicant, please) to: Cat Fantasy Contest, c/o Del Rey Books, 201 East 50th Street, New York, NY 10022, and be sure to include your full name and return address. For complete contest guidelines and rules, check our Web site at: www.randomhouse.com/wildroad

*G*ood luck!





"THE ULTIMATE ANIMAL ADVENTURE."

—Terry Pratchett, author of the Discworld novels

GABRIEL KING'S

THE *W*ILD ROAD

Is there a secret world of cats?

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—William Horwood, author of *Dunston Wood*



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LOST GIRLS

Continued from page 38

be fished out, wrung out, and then hauled up again — it was a silent and well-practiced operation.

The girls stood in a huddle on the well-lit deck and awaited their fate. Darla was glad no one said anything. She felt awful. She hadn't meant them to come to this. Peter had been right. Wishes in Neverland were dangerous.

"Here come the captains," said one of the pirates. It was the first thing anyone had said since the capture.

He must mean captain, singular, thought Darla. But when she heard footsteps nearing them and dared to look up, there were, indeed, two figures coming forward. One was an old man about her grandfather's age, his white hair in two braids, a three-cornered hat on his head. She looked for the infamous hook but he had two regular hands, though the right one was clutching a pen.

The other captain was . . . a woman.

"Welcome to Hook's ship," the woman said. "I'm Mrs. Hook. Also known as Mother Jane. Also known as Pirate Lil. I've also been called The Pirate Queen. We've been hoping we could get you away from Peter for a very long time." She shook hands with each of the girls and gave Lizzy a hug.

"I need to get to the doctor, ma'am," said one of the pirates. "That little girl . . ." he pointed to JoAnne. . . . gave me quite a slice."

JoAnne blanched and shrank back into herself.

But Captain Hook only laughed. It was a hearty laugh, full of good humor. "Good for her. You're getting careless in your old age, Smee," he said. "Stitches will remind you to stay alert. Peter would have got your throat, and even here on the boat that could take a long while to heal."

"Now," said Mrs. Hook, "it's time for a good meal. Pizza, I think. With plenty of veggies on top. Peppers, mushrooms, carrots, onions. But no anchovies. I have never understood why anyone wants a hairy fish on top of pizza."

"What's pizza?" asked Lizzy.

"Ah . . . something you will love, my dear," answered Mrs. Hook. "Things never do change in Peter's Neverland, but up here on Hook's ship we move with the times."

"Who will do the dishes after?" asked Betsy cautiously.

The crew rustled behind them.

"I'm on dishes this week," said one, a burly, ugly man with a black eyepatch.

"And I," said another. She was as big as the ugly man, but attractive in a rough sort of way.

"There's a duty roster on the wall by the

galley," explained Mrs. Hook. "That's ship talk for the kitchen. You'll get used to it. We all take turns. A pirate ship is a very democratic place."

"What's demo-ratic?" asked Lizzy.

They all laughed. "You will have a long time to learn," said Mrs. Hook. "Time moves more swiftly here than in the stuffy confines of a Neverland tree. But not so swiftly as out in the world. Now let's have that pizza, a hot bath, and a bedtime story, and then tomorrow we'll try and answer your questions."

The girls cheered, JoAnne loudest of them all.

"I am hungry," Lizzy added, as if that were all the answer Mrs. Hook needed.

"But I'm not," Darla said. "And I don't want to stay here. Not in Neverland or on Hook's ship. I want to go home."

Captain Hook came over and put his good hand under her chin. Gently he lifted her face into the light. "Father beat you?" he asked.

"Never," Darla said.

"Mother desert you?" he asked.

"Fat chance," said Darla.

"Starving? Miserable? Alone?"

"No. And no. And no."

Hook turned to his wife and shrugged. She shrugged back, then asked, "Ever think that the world was unfair, child?"

"Who hasn't?" asked Darla, and Mrs. Hook smiled.

"Thinking it and meaning it are two very different things," Mrs. Hook said at last. "I expect you must have been awfully convincing to have landed at Peter's door. Never mind, have pizza with us, and then you can go. I want to hear the latest from outside, anyway. You never know what we might find useful. Pizza was the last really useful thing we learned from one of the girls we snagged before Peter found her. And that — I can tell you — has been a major success."

"Can't I go home with Darla?" Lizzy asked.

Mrs. Hook knelt down till she and Lizzy were face-to-face. "I am afraid that would make for an awful lot of awkward questions," she said.

Lizzy's blue eyes filled up with tears.

"My mom is a lawyer," Darla put in quickly. "Awkward questions are her specialty."

The pizza was great, with a crust that was thin and delicious. And when Darla awoke to the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall and the sound of the maple branch *scritch-scratching* against the clapboard siding, the taste of the pizza was still in her mouth. She felt a lump at her feet, raised up, and saw Lizzy fast asleep under the covers at the foot of the bed.

"I sure hope Mom is as good as I think she is," Darla whispered. Because there was no going back on this one — fair, unfair, or anywhere in between. ♣

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Yes, there's a hologram in this story, and it's set in the future, too.
But if you don't think it's a fantasy, then you've never been in love.

LUSTMAN

BY PAT YORK

Illustration by Mary O'Keefe Young

I first see my Lustman in my Lady's place. It a tight old squidy three rooms, but it near to the Cool Zone and she have a maid — that's me — and so she think her ass don't stink. And I think sometimes maybe she be right 'cause her stuff be *muy sabroso*. It take money and knowing somebody to get

stuff like that, like that hologram of my Lustman.

It sit in her parlor room where her kid and me, we don't never go 'cause we not allowed. The kid, he play with his V.R. helmet in his room or with them blocks in the kitchen and that give him and me enough room to, maybe, turn around once a day, but my Lady, she don't care. That parlor room be where she sleep and where she have people in when she make me stay late and hand them that cheap wine and pot off a Dayglo trays and she act like she all grand and shit.

When she bring my Lustman home she put him all wrapped in real tree paper on the table and she pull the paper off and there he is. He glow like he shine from inside but they ain't no solar cell nor no cord or nothing on the picture, he just glow is all. He look like a tree, I swear it to El Señor, he green and cool all up and down and have leaves where his hair should be. They hang down his back soft and easy but he don't fool me; he a man body and soul and my soul talk to him and say you are mine.

My soul tell him about Mommi and Poppi in the dark hole uptown and the slow, dirty ground bus home and the kid all day long in his dark hole and just me to be with. And he tell me don't you worry María Pilar my own, my love, my heart, I see you and I love you and I'm tall and strong and I love you. Don't you worry none, *mí tesoro*.

His soul come out'n them eyes. Them eyes, my Lustman eyes. They so deep and beautiful. He for me. I feel

it in my heart and I love him for my life.

My Lady, she don't look at me or the kid, she just look at the picture. But it's not love with her, it's just one more thing to own in that dark hole full of stuff she own. She put him up, her own self, up on a wall that she tell me to clear off and he glow and make that room a shrine for me. She didn't mean to do that, but el Buen Dio set her hand right and that's what she done.

The old, ugly electric ground bus whine and skuff up the street. It be dragging three trailers of us tired nannies and doormen and bus boys and shit, and it stall and stop and that asshole driver won't give no passes.

They don't give me no policy on no passes, he say real sweet.

Check on you radio, somebody say.

The radio be broke so I can't check in. Everybody off. Sorry. He look all sorry but he point to the door and don't stop pointing and waving 'til we all gone.

We all know he going to report that he give us passes and then he sell them and put a buncha money in his crotchbag. But they's nothing we can do.

The day be like the North Pole swept out'n Canada and send us a million needles, that's how cold it be. I don't have

no gloves nor nothing for my head and I got two heavy sacks of shopping that I got in my Lady's neighborhood where stuff be cheaper. I think I gonna freeze, but I walk and I think about my Lustman.

He laying in front of a fire and his hair be black today. He don't have no clothes on and his muscles is dry and round sliding under his skin. The fire color him red and orange. He reach out his beautiful long fingers and wrap them around the top of my leg and I see I'm naked too. I got long, brown legs that stretch out to the fire like his. My belly all flat and smooth and it melt when he touch me. I slide a hand around his neck and bring his head down onto my stomach. He breathing's warm there like the fire, only wetter and it feel like a soft, gentle blanket that heat and cool, heat and cool when he breathe. His tongue, it tickle my stomach and I melt a little more even though I didn't think I could. My long, black hair hide his face so I pitch it back over my shoulder. I look at him again and I see that his nose and eye and forehead make one smooth line like I paint it in orange on him.

And I get a smack in the side of my head and I go flyin' off to one side and a Yellow Cab almost knock me into the snow.

It be a Floydboy, I'm talkin' to you, bitch! He screaming at me and I'm too cold to run and nobody around me want no trouble, so I see I gotta say something, so I say, I didn't mean nothing. I was just thinking is all.

He see I don't disrespect him so he don't hit me again, he just say, You got something good in them bags, bitch? And I have to give him all of Mommi and Poppi's oranges and he go away. That's a shock. I didn't think Floydboys never ate. I think they drink blood or something. Mostly they leave us alone and go and fight other gangs, or they grab somebody for the liver and kidney fences or sell drugsit or whatever.

Pilar! Oh! Mi hija! My little girl! Where you been? My Poppi cripple his arms around me and hug and hug. Poppi don't remember nothing no more. You have to tell and tell and he still don't remember. Mommi's no help 'cause she so used to thinking Poppi right all the time and now she too old to stop thinking that. They think together every day that I'm leaving and I won't be coming home no more. I tell them and explain and leave notes around, but it don't help and they even cry with big, fat, old-people tears when they see me 'cause they figure I change my mind and come home and they so relieved and thanking me and all.

I give Poppi my Lady's yesterday newspaper and he real happy. He sit down and try to pick out the English words and look at the pictures. The oranges is gone, so I ask Mommi do she want a bath and she say, OK.

They don't sleep good no more so it's always me says, I gotta go to sleep, work start so early in the morning. They hug me and hug me with they old-people-smelling arms and go to the bedroom and I pull out the couch and lay down and finally get some time to myself.

My Lustman and me is still by the fire. He's rolled me on top of his beautiful stomach with ridges along it where the muscles underneath move, and he sliding his soft hands along my thighs. He's sort of propped up on the front of the couch and the rug under my knees is soft wool. I can look at his face now. His hair be blond this time. He look with such love in his eyes and his lips a little apart and finally he close his eyes and smile and pull me up under the arms. We make love and then we lie down on that soft, white rug next to each other, curled like two kittens and the fire crackle.

I go to work all warm and happy, that time with my Lustman be so good and I sleep like a lizard in the hot sun. My lady, she run out the door like every morning and I go in and find the kid sleeping in his shit again like every morning.

Hey, Pilar, he say. He call my name like a pillar on a church. I tell him all the time how to say it right, but my Lady, she say it wrong, so he do too.

I say, When you learn to shit in the toilet like a big boy? And I try to smile. He go to school in another two year. What he do then? He don't say nothing, just shrug.

I clean him up and take him to the store 'cause my Lady, she leave me this note and the household debit card. The clerk look at everything I buy like I'm stealing it. What she think, my Lady don't come home and count every cracker and tofu and sprout? Anyhow, I won't eat the crap she feed that kid. That shit kill you.

My lady don't let me take the kid to the park or even he can play on the street. She scared all the time, like somebody want her homey little kid what's more than three and still can't use the toilet. So the kid's skin look like paste and he all flabby and can't talk much. But we spend some time with the kids across the way, they nanny is named Mary Kate. Her kids is brats so my kid don't get along with them so well, but it's better than nothing, trade one black hole for another. And Mary Kate and me talk. She real young and real pretty and funny to talk to. I think she like me, but it's hard to tell for sure. Hardly nobody talk to a maid in this neighborhood. After awhile you think you never going to talk to nobody but old folks or little kids.

She say, I like that picture your boss has in her lounge. Mary Kate have this Irish accent makes everything sound like 'rs.

It scare me just a little bit that she know about my Lustman's picture so I shrug and say, It's OK.

She say, His name is Mike. The man in the picture. He's from that high-fallutin' Cool Zone, you know. I saw him any number of times on the news. Isn't he a fine broth of a man, though?

I know all about the Zone, I say back real sharp. Why you think he in a hologram, fool? He be a Avatar, one of them that they dress up and send to clubs and shows and take holos of and shit. You think I'm just off the island? Just climbed out of a palm tree?

No need to bite my head off Mary Kate try to look all hurt, but I know she's really sorry she can't tell me all about the Zone.

And I'm almost wild in my head. Mike. My Lustman name is Mike. MikeMikeMike. I eat you name like a choc'late spoon slow and easy. So smooth in my mouth and sliding down my throat all hot and swampy. 'tween my legs I feel all itchy. Mike. I love you name 'cause you my Lustman and when we together they not no lady or kid and not even no Mommi and Poppi. They don't be no buses that die nor Floydboys hurting and wrecking everything nice.

Have you ever been to the Zone, Pilar? Mary Kate talking to me and I pull myself back and make my brain hear what she say.

I laugh a little. Me? Go to the Cool Zone? No. How I go to the Zone? I don't look right for it. I be short and square and look like what I am and that's a maid. Anyway, I got no clothes and no money to get in the clubs.

She turn her head a little and say, Money's no problem. You could just stand outside, then, couldn't you? I'd love to go just to look around, you know.

My folks is sick, I say back soft. They home all day alone. I can't get no one to watch them. I can't go out.

Don't they sleep, she asks me and her voice go up and her pretty eyebrows go up too.

She making me feel real strange. I stop looking at her and pick up the kid's toys. I say, Sure they sleep. They wake up and they think I run off and leave 'em. They not crazy, you know? Just old and sick.

She make a funny noise in her throat. She say, Yes, of course I understand. I send money home every month to my own folks. My sister looks after them. She lives in Kallaloo.

I nod and I say, You must get paid more than me. I never got a penny to spare.

She shrug and say, I live in.

I think live-in's a nasty life. Maybe a little more money, but no time off hardly and no alone time for a beer or maybe walk to the john bare ass. I try live-in when Mommi and Poppi was good. Hated it. My Lady would love for me to live-in, the kid and me in his room that used to be a closet, smelling like shit and no room to hang a cat. Bullshit.

I be getting jumpy talking to her so I take my kid's hand and his toys and I go back to our place. He be hungry and whiney. I can't hug him. He be wearing a babywatch and it set off my Lady's alarm if the kid get hugged or hit or I take more than a few seconds with his diaper or they think he get some shit like that. I hate it 'cause the kid need a hug, but nobody ask me what he need. And I can't say nothing without she wonder do I want to hug him to be sick. She don't never want to know what I think about the kid. What the hell do I know?

I feed him that crap she have for him to eat and eat my rice and beans from home. I clean, and cook they dinner and finally my Lady come and I can get out a that black hole. I don't say bye to the kid and he don't say bye to me, he just start crying to his Mommi. What you bring me, what you bring me?

I been thinking all day about what Mary Kate say and I been looking at my Lustman picture and I think how much, oh how much I want to see his real skin, his real eyes and I be hungry all day for that. My eyes hurt in my head for it, my fingers itch.

I go to Mary Kate's Lady's door and I knock. Some guy come and say, Yes?

Mary Kate, I mumble out and look him in the eye 'cause he no better than me, is he?

She come out into the hall and I say, What you doing Sunday? Saturday's best, she say back like she been waiting for me. I clean two houses Saturday, I say back. Gotta be Sunday. Well, all right, then, she say and smile a little. What we wear? I ask her. What a short, dumpy *Puerto Riqueña* and a Mick chick wear to the Zone? We got nothing they going to respect.

I'll take care of it, she say back cool and calm as anything. Shit, she can be calm. She smart and pretty and real young and all. What about me?

Mike and me is walking in a place with stone houses on two sides and beautiful, clean street in the middle. He tall over me and he hold me around my skinny dream waist and move me around with his hand in my back like I too good to bump anything.

It's right up here, he say to me and now his hair be red like Mary Kate's and he smile at me, shy and wanting me to smile back so I do.

I tell him about Mary Kate and the Zone and how I want to see him and he listen and walk and we go into a old stone building and into a little elevator what's not all gang tags and smell like piss but quiet and metal shining.

This is my place, he say real quiet and work a key in a red door. Place is big. Like a soccer field, his parlor.

Dios mio, Mike, the kid could really run in here. Hell, kid can ride a pony here.

Bring him with you any time, Mike say gentle. Really. You're spending more time raising him than his own mother, aren't you?

But I say, Not the same, Mike. Not the same. He not mine. I don't want him to be mine. I don't even like him. Just feel bad for him is all. You be mine, Mike. You and me is each other.

He fold those long arms around me and it not me, but the me with the long hair and long legs. I'm so small he swallow me up in those arms. He pull me up, and I wrap my legs around him and he hold me like a little kid in that big room and walk me to a chair in the sunshine from big, big windows.

He slide my shoes off and my skirt and he pull off my clean, white blouse one arm at a time, gentle. He kiss the bend of my arm and I shake all over.

Somebody see us, I say almost too thick to hear.

I don't care he say, but he pick me up and take me to a darker room, not dark like the holes I live in but soft, clean dark with sun fingers poking in the curtains. We never been in a bed before. This one is nice. White and big with a wood thing over our heads and four pieces of white wood to hold that up like it was a roof or something and wood under, to hold up the mattress. It be like a little house.

He angry now and hard with me, and he know he can't hurt me 'cause I'm strong and I shout to him and he's stronger and take it all and I'm a rock he can pour into, never fill, never give in.

They's no heat on the bus, but we make it all the way to my block, only so slow we coulda walked, and I think about Sunday and think and think. How I leave Mommi and Poppi? I can't do that. They old and sweet and they love me. Sunday we go to Mass and that's one day they don't cry and worry.

I walk past the nun's place for junkies and crazies. It be a old car garage they changed. Them nuns is so tough, they hauled the cement blocks themselves and paint up on ladders and make that old place snug and cozy. Cops bring street crazies to the nuns and the nuns put them up overnight and clean them up and feed them a meal. I give them nuns a buck or two when I can.

I get to thinking, looking at that car garage all painted up yellow and red and I walk in.

One of the nuns be cleaning the floor with a mop. She in big jeans with a bib like the Floyd boys wear, but clean. She got a rag round her head and long flannel shirt on and heavy boots. She look like she could beat me up.

You take old folks, Sister? I say it and she jump like she been far off in her head with her own Lustman.

Oh! Hello, dear. I was just going through my cata in my head. Do you know karate?

I say, No, Ma'am. Sister, you take old folks? Not for always, just one night? I just want one night is all.

That nun, she stop and look at me hard. She making a noise in her chest like she not so healthy. Sound like my Mommi chest. She say, You have some old people in your family? They need a place to stay?

One night, I say. Just for one night. They might think I leave them forever, they might tell you that, but I don't be that way. I take good care of them every day. Only, I just want one night. Not even all night. Just a while.

She wait a long, long time and stare at me. I get feeling real bad and so I say, I finish that mopping for you if you want. I'm real good. Can't beat me at mopping.

Then she smile and she hand me the mop but she don't go off. She just watch me for a minute. Yes, you are very good. You want a night out for yourself, is that it? Or do you have a job that night?

I frown that she think I don't work steady so I say, I work every day but Sunday. Just that Mommi and Poppi ain't good alone and Sunday is they only day not to worry and I ... I want Sunday. Just one. And I keep mopping. Maybe she trying to get around what I said, but maybe she want me to feel bad and I do feel bad, so I just keep mopping.

I feel her hand on my arm and I look up. She say, I work here this Sunday. Bring your parents in after Mass. I'll be very glad to have them visit.

I stop mopping for a minute. I can't say much. I want to keep pushing that mop but I think about Mommi and Poppi at home and I know I gotta stop. OK., I say to the nun, OK.

She say, I'm Sister Carrie Nation, dear. If I'm not at the front desk, just ask for me. She been trying to pull that mop outa my hand and so I let her and I say, My name Pilar Esteves. Thank you, Sister. Thank you. And I walk outa there before she talk back.

Mike and me is in his white wood bed and we tangled up in sheets that's the color of a sky and shine like my Lady's new dress. We not doing nothing, not now. We just laying there, all arms and legs and his breath be moving the curls near my eye and my long, fine nails is on his stomach, gentle, not scratching, but copying scratch marks from before. My Mike, he don't care about a mark. He so easy. He

never tell me what to do and that's why I love him so much.

A little at a time I tell him about Mary Kate and he say I did good with Sister Carrie Nation, that she take good care of my folks and all.

I don't know what to wear, I say. Don't know how to be.

It doesn't matter, he say back real slow. I don't care. Nobody else will care. It will be my own Pilar. That is enough. And I fall asleep on that beautiful bed and wake up on my lumpy couch feeling fine and bright.

And that old Sunday don't come and don't come like days is crawling, and the kid, he can tell I feel that way and he all whiney and snotty, and my Lady, she say, What have you been doing all day, Pilar? I pay you good money and plenty of it ... and on and on.

But finally Sunday come and I give Mommi a bath and I make sure Poppi have a shave so Sister Carrie Nation not think I disrespect them.

We go to Mass and I almost pee myself waiting, but, also, I pray, *querida San José*, you never got none, even though you married to *Santa Maria* and you not even get to be the father of your kid. Dear Saint Joseph, if you know what it be like, all lonely and never feel lovey hands on you and how bad that is, please, please *San José*, help me find my Mike and make him see how this poor, don't-talk-much female be the one what loves him so much she love his picture.

We walk out church and I say to Mommi and Poppi, We go see the good Sisters now.

And Poppi, he say, It not time to go home, Pilar? We done with church don't we go home now? in his worried, Poppi voice.

But I say, real sweet, No, no, Poppi, *las buenas hermanas*, the good Sisters, they want to meet you 'cause I tell them all about you and Mommi. And he think about that and we walk a little way to that bright-painted car place what's says The Feminist Franciscan Homeless Shelter and we walk in.

They a skinny, tiny little woman in jeans and head rag like Sister Carrie, and she smile and say, Are you Pilar Esteves? I'm Sister Mary Wolstonecraft. Sister Carrie asked me to wait for you. And nice as anything, she take Mommi and Poppi over to a table with coffee and she give them some and over her shoulder she wave at me like, Go while you have the chance, girl! And I wave back and she smile, so I know it's OK. And I run out that place.

On the street I feel like I run away from home or something.

I save enough money that I got bus rides to Mary Kate's, into the Cool Zone, and back. I don't have nothing for nothing else, but I got that.

Mike, he sitting in the big parlor where we was last and he not moving, just the loose of his shirt moving gentle on he chest and he breathing in and out, in and out and I can hear him thinking, Pilar, Pilar, my love, come to me, please come to me! How can we wait so long? I come closer and they's tears in his eyes and he look so lonely.

I know how, I whisper, Soon. I coming, *Miquelito, mi corazón*, I'm coming.

We say that over and over to each other. We so close I can almost feel his fingers touching my hair — my short, dry, real world hair, not the long, soft dream hair and I cry too, like when you finish a long, hard day and you so tired you can't hardly think about a time you not working.

I ride up my Lady elevator, all scared if she see me on my day off and ask me what I'm doing, but she not around and Mary Kate open the door at the place where she work.

Come in. She say all easy, and I get it. The family be all gone. Must be. And that's the way it is. The monitors be turned off so they don't even know she have anybody in. They trust her so much! Nobody I work for ever trust me so much. I'm surprised and that not the only surprise I get. I walk into that place and it dark like always, but she change this tiny thing and that, she's moved

chairs and hanged soft scarves and it not bad at all; very pretty.

You move stuff around, I say. I like it.

They have no taste, these people I work for. It's a shame because they have some lovely things. I put this and that together when they have one of their family weekends to make the place feel more like my own.

We sit in her parlor just like always, but it feel like her own parlor, not like she work there. She give me fresh fruit to eat and I eat it too, plums and pineapple like back home, so sweet it make my mouth work while I eat it.

So, when we go? I ask her, 'cause the house and fruit be real nice but Mike, he calling me even now that I can't dream about him.

She say, First we dress, then we go. She sound chirpy like a little bird. Get into the shower, Pilar, and I'll lay your things out. I'll do your make-up, too.

I never, never wash at my Lady house. I figure she notice a black hair or some soap gone or the monitor scream at her. Some days when the kid sick I could use a wash, but I never done it. I love this shower. Don't share with nobody, and the towels is thick and real fluffy.

I scrub the shower when I finish and leave it cleaner than when I start. Mary Kate, she waiting for me and she mess with my hair and she paint up my face so I don't know myself. Then she pull out a thing all fluffy and soft. It's dark and go this way and that on me. I never wear nothing close to that before.

She say, You've got that bad a figure for a woman who works as hard as you do, Pilar. You're not a bit fat, but you've no waist, girl! And your legs, bless you, you have that bad legs. Like the posts in front of the grocer's. But I think this dress covers most of your sins. Yes. That's not half bad. I checked the Zone ordinances, they won't stamp you. Anyway, I hope they won't. Now, don't sit down and don't eat anything. I've got to do myself.

She talk about me like a chicken in the market but I don't say nothing. I need Mary Kate to go to the Zone with me. I got no courage to do it alone.

She shower and I stand in the bedroom and shout, Why you want to go to the Zone so bad?

I figure she didn't hear me, but then she say back, It's a way out. You know, Pilar? I can't stay here the rest of my life, can I? I haven't a friend this side of the Atlantic. If I don't do something, hell, I might end up like ... I mean like so many other people I've seen who are maids or nannies at 30 or 40. I have to make my way in the world while I'm still young, now, don't I? And I couldn't go without you, Pilar. You've a good heart. You give me the courage.

I wait and wait and wait and Mary Kate finally come out of that bathroom and I don't know it's her. She have heavy paint on her face and maybe cloth, maybe paint on her body. I see now why her talk about me. She look something wonderful. How's my Mike going to look at me when Mary Kate be around? But I don't worry or fret, I love my Mike and I know he love me when he finally see me.

My Mike, he leaning on that clean stone building where we walk to before. But it's not sunny now, it be dark, like raining, and he have his hands in his pockets, his shoulders is curled over like he's real cold and I know he's watching for me, watching, waiting. He drop his head down once, then look up into the dark wind and watch, just watch.

They got a little house where the Zone start. Little house with people in it and they look at all the people who walking past. They got a big stamp and a thing of orange paint what shine in the dark and if they don't like how you look, they stamp you on you forehead

and that paint don't wash off for a day or two. I see a couple of people get almost to that little house and they stop and turn around and go back.

Mary Kate! We going back now, OK? I whisper real hard. She's shaking, I can feel it, but she just say, No. They won't stamp us. And if they do I have some of Mrs. Sedegian's make-up will cover it over.

Then I think of Mike and I be calm and easy and even smile at the people in the house when it's our turn to walk past. But I don't dare to say nothing and they don't talk to me. But they smile at Mary Kate and nod and we walk right past.

This Cool Zone, it's not like nowhere I ever been. It's so clean. Sidewalks all clean, buildings look like somebody wash them today, people all clean and good looking and happy. They all be so happy! And it's warm! I see the Moon over my head but it's warm like they's a roof over us. I don't know how they do that one, but I love it!

We did it! Mary Kate say, all surprised. But I think she look like she belong here, all happy and easy about the place.

I start to say, I can't believe ..., but Mary Kate don't hear me. She walk all over. Blocks of walking, looking. She whisper, but she don't point. Once she see a dress in a dress shop. 'Tisn't a good design, it has no flash, she say, like she know. And I start to think, yeah, she know.

I start to wonder what be cool and what's not when there's Floyd-boys beating on maids for oranges and a place like this, so clean and happy, and they's both in the same city. Then I think I need a job here. People in the Zone need maids too, don't they?

I want to find Mike. I say it out loud before I know I think it. I get real red, 'cause I never told Mary Kate why I want to go to the Zone before.

But she don't seem surprised. She just pause and say, Choo-Choo's Club, I think. I read that the Avatars and the folks who pay to live here and such all hang out at Choo-Choo's.

No, no my dear little squids, somebody say behind us. We turn around and a woman all feathers and paint be talking to us. Then I begin to think he not be a woman when I see his bare chest. He say, It's Feline's now, my dears. You'll find Mike and Springtime and May Fen, well, all of them will be there.

But not you? Mary Kate say like he a cleaner or nanny like us. His feathers flutter a little and he say, no, not me.

Mary Kate smile all friendly at him then and he cheer up a little. Just walk east four or five blocks and you're there. Then he swirl his feathers and he walk off.

Feline's is like any club but big and clean and real bright lights and people all around it in lines.

Mary Kate say, come on. She grab my hand and walk past that line of people and up to the door. I whisper for her to stop and try to pull my hand outa hers, but she hang onto me and keep walking fast.

Just like I was afraid of, there's a great big guy at the door. I want tell Mary Kate I don't got no money to get in, but it don't matter, 'cause the big guy say, OK, Red, sure. You. But not your fat friend.

Mary Kate turn to me, smile a little. Sorry, she say. She let go my hand and walk into that place all beautiful and young and leave me standing in the street.

Some of them people on the line, they make cheering noises and say nice stuff about Mary Kate. Some of them say stuff about me, too, but I'm not listening. I be used to people saying stuff at me.

No offense, honey, the big guy say. Get in line. You'll get in eventually.

I say, I'm sorry I bother you, Sir. Sorry.

The lights don't look too good to me now, and I just say that and I walk to a kind of quiet, green park where it's darker and I can see when Mary Kate come out. There's a seat in the dark with trees and flowers around it. I'm not sure if it be OK to sit there, but I'm thinking about the big guy outside Feline's and about Mary Kate and Mommi and Poppi and do the Feminist Franciscans take care of them and mostly I'm thinking about how will I ever see Mike? I sit down and wait for somebody to say, Don't sit there. Don't nobody say nothing, so I just keep sitting. I can just see the door to Feline's

through a hole where the tree stuff don't grow, but it's dark and quiet, so this a good place for me.

I wait awhile and it real quiet and dark and I start to feel a little better, maybe. And maybe a little worse. But I like the dark and quiet so I stay.

I hear a person walking from far away, walking closer and closer to me, footsteps, titap, titap, titap. People been walking by all night, visitors and guys what are sweet but they look like cops anyway, but this is not like that. I look into the dark and see light making circles on the clean, shiny walks and I finally see someone walk where the light don't show so good and I see my own, my dear, my Mike!

I run to my love. Mike! I shout his name, 'cause it like my blood to me and I'm so happy and easy like the Cool Zone people. Now, me too, I'm happy!

I'm going to throw my arms around his neck and hold him to my heart and say, don't cry, Don't be sad anymore, I'm here. But he stop and put his hands out in front of him. And then so do I. He don't look like his picture now. Tonight he got little, silver, short pants and a silver shirt and a long earring in his ears that sparkle. He got lots of paint on his face like Mary Kate only different.

You're in the Zone, bitch, don't you know how to behave?

I can't open my mouth for a second. He's my Mike for sure, I know him. But he don't sound like my Mike, and he don't know me? Don't he dream? Don't he love?

My name is Pilar! I finally say.

So? he say back.

I see you in my Lady's parlor. You look like a beautiful tree, all flowers and your hair look like leaves.

Then he look interested. Sweet, he say. I thought they stopped selling those last year.

He can't hear me, I think. He don't understand me. He love me if he can only hear my words and feel what I be feeling. How can I feel so hard and he not feel? What can I say, what can I say? I think I'm going to cry, and he be getting mad again, so I say the only thing I can.

Mike, I love you. Love you with my soul. I love you.

His face look all scared and watchful, and he say, I can call a monitor, you know. They're all over. God, I should have taken the carriage with the others.

And I wish he hit me before he ever say that ... before I ever say what I say. He coulda knocked me down and gone on and I wouldn't have to hear his voice like that.

I see just then why he don't walk past me before. They's bunches of flowers on both sides of the path. If he walk past me, he rub into them flowers and maybe hurt them or get his shiny clothes dirty. I back up fast so he can get past me. And then we in one of the big pools of light. He be walking past me, but then he stop, and look at me. I'm not thinking at all just then, but he look at me and I think he's going to reach out and smack me, but his hand go to my head and he pat me like I pat the kid sometimes when he cry.

You pathetic little squid, he say. Got it bad, huh? Well, worse than lots of them, anyway. Just tell yourself you picked the bastard of the planet to fall in love with, Sweetie. Because it's true, you know. I'm the bastard king of the center of the universe. OK, Honey?

And he walks away and in a minute I hear a big noise from all them people still in the line in front of Feline's and I know Mike get there. And I don't have to see the big guy opening the door for him or Mary Kate walking up to him, but different from me, real different.

I wait a long, long time and Mary Kate finally come out of Feline's. She start walking, and I come to her and we walk out of the Cool Zone together, but we don't say much.

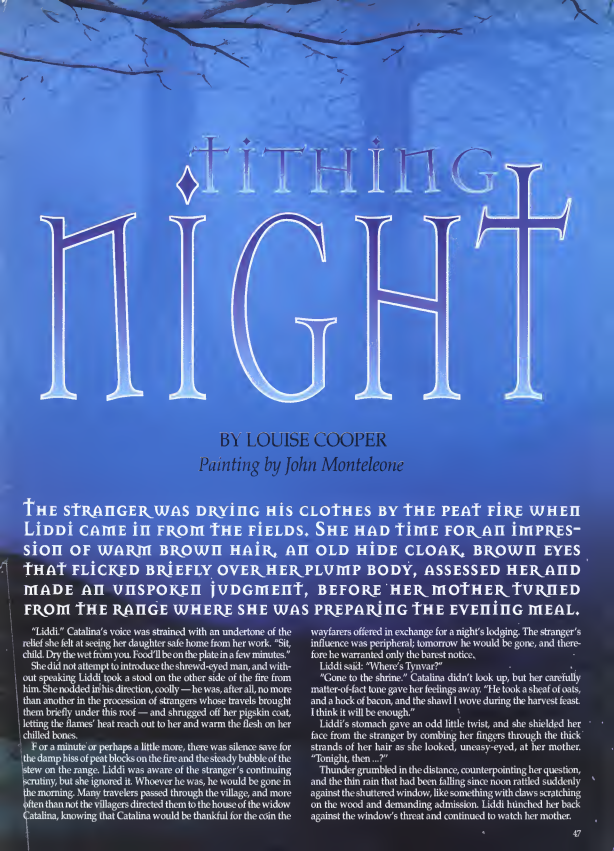
She look at me finally and say, I have to have the dress back before it's missed.

You seen Mike too, I say then.

I think she be real pleased and brag at me, but she just look pished. He has a girl already. It's a major Zone event, Mike and this girl. But I did talk to some folk — I made some connections — so

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TITHING NIGHT

BY LOUISE COOPER

Painting by John Monteleone

THE STRANGER WAS DRYING HIS CLOTHES BY THE PEAT FIRE WHEN LIDDI CAME IN FROM THE FIELDS. SHE HAD TIME FOR AN IMPRESSION OF WARM BROWN HAIR, AN OLD HIDE CLOAK, BROWN EYES THAT FLICKED BRIEFLY OVER HER PLUMP BODY, ASSESSED HER AND MADE AN UNSPOKEN JUDGMENT, BEFORE HER MOTHER TURNED FROM THE RANGE WHERE SHE WAS PREPARING THE EVENING MEAL.

"Liddi." Catalina's voice was strained with an undertone of the relief she felt at seeing her daughter safe home from her work. "Sit, child. Dry the wet from you. Food'll be on the plate in a few minutes."

She did not attempt to introduce the shrewd-eyed man, and without speaking Liddi took a stool on the other side of the fire from him. She nodded in his direction, coolly — he was, after all, no more than another in the procession of strangers whose travels brought them briefly under this roof — and shrugged off her pigskin coat, letting the flames' heat reach out to her and warm the flesh on her chilled bones.

For a minute or perhaps a little more, there was silence save for the damp hiss of peat blocks on the fire and the steady bubble of the stew on the range. Liddi was aware of the stranger's continuing scrutiny, but she ignored it. Whoever he was, he would be gone in the morning. Many travelers passed through the village, and more often than not the villagers directed them to the house of the widow Catalina, knowing that Catalina would be thankful for the coin the

wayfarers offered in exchange for a night's lodging. The stranger's influence was peripheral; tomorrow he would be gone, and therefore he warranted only the barest notice.

Liddi said: "Where's Tynvar?"

"Gone to the shrine." Catalina didn't look up, but her carefully matter-of-fact tone gave her feelings away. "He took a sheaf of oats, and a hock of bacon, and the shawl I wove during the harvest feast. I think it will be enough."

Liddi's stomach gave an odd little twist, and she shielded her face from the stranger by combing her fingers through the thick strands of her hair as she looked, uneasy-eyed, at her mother. "Tonight, then ...?"

Thunder grumbled in the distance, counterpointing her question, and the thin rain that had been falling since noon rattled suddenly against the shuttered window, like something with claws scratching on the wood and demanding admission. Liddi hunched her back against the window's threat and continued to watch her mother.

"Yes," Catalina said. "The signs have begun."

Liddi made no answer.

As she bent her back and hoed weeds from the turnip fields under the cold scowl of a waterlogged, leaden sky, she too had felt the first whisper of the Sentinel's coming. She couldn't give it a name; it had been no more than a thin, wailing, will-o'-the-wisp of an apparition, a shimmer at the periphery of her vision, darting between the rows of struggling young plants and making her chapped hands freeze on the hoe as it flitted by. Megann, her best friend, had stopped her work to stare at the scuttering phantom as it carried on its chaotic way from the shadows of the brooding mountain; then she had shaken her head wordlessly and both girls carried on with their labors.

But the little will-o'-the-wisp was the first of many. Trudging home, listening to the familiar chatter of the stream flowing beneath the hump-backed bridge at the village's boundary, Liddi had seen something that looked like a disembodied cat's face hanging in the dusk before her; its eyes shone, and it mewled before metamorphosing into a tiny fireball that streaked away, almost but not quite brushing her face, to merge with the last angry glare of sunset through the rainclouds. As the great wing of night shadow moved in from the east, carrying the damp, heather-soaked scent of the mountain that ruled their lives, she had heard the voices that chuckled and shrieked and cried on the wind that bore them. Their wordless warnings had resounded in her mind and quickened her steps, until at last her dogs rang on cobbles and familiar voices greeted her out of the gathering dark as lamps were lit in the village's single street to press back the night.

Now, in the sanctuary of her home, there was a stranger who could not understand the nature of the thing that walked down from the mountains toward them. And her brother was gone to the shrine, to placate the night walker so that he might not follow in the footsteps

hoping that no one saw, she curled her fingers and made a swift, furtive hex sign before her own breast.

Seven years since the Sentinel last walked down from her lair on the slope of the brooding mountain. Seven years since the dead-white hand had rapped on the bolted door of this cottage, issuing the summons that couldn't be ignored. Seven years since Catalina had watched in helpless, petrified silence, as her husband walked from the room where his children cried, took the translucent, outstretched fingers, gazed into the ancient eyes in their frame of white hair It couldn't happen a second time. Catalina's husband had been taken, but her one grain of comfort was that the white woman had demanded enough from her household. Tonight she would come again, but tonight someone else's cottage would shiver to the knocking of her thin, pale hand. She would take her due from another family, and the villagers would comfort the bereft wife or mother or child, safe in the certainty that the Sentinel would continue to watch over them, as she had done for centuries past. Catalina shuddered as a quick, bitter spasm of hatred welled in her heart; then with an effort of will she pushed the emotion away. It was wrong to hate the Sentinel, for she was an emissary of the great Lords of Chaos themselves. And though Chaos was an exacting master, it took good care of its own. The price its Lords demanded for their benevolence was not for mortals to question, and while the village continued to pay the Sentinel's tithe, the land would prosper.

No one ever spoke of what might await those who walked from their fireside at the Sentinel's calling and followed her along the road into the mountains. The manner of their living, if they lived, or the manner of their deaths, if they died, was beyond the villagers' willingness or ability to imagine, and though prayers were said for their souls at the shrine beyond the last cottage, it had become a rigid tradition that no private speculations on their fate were ever shared.

NO ONE EVER SPOKE OF WHAT MIGHT AWAIT THOSE WHO WALKED FROM THEIR FIRESIDE AT THE SENTINEL'S CALLING AND FOLLOWED HER ALONG THE ROAD INTO THE MOUNTAINS.

of the father who had answered her summons seven years ago, and left a wife and children to fend for themselves as best they could.

The stove sizzled hotly, and a rich, herb-laced scent mingled with the more prosaic smell of burning as a ladleful of the stew spilled. Pottery rattled; Catalina spread plates on the table.

"Liddi." Her voice was normal; her thoughts, Liddi knew, were not. "Serve our good guest, if you please."

Obediently Liddi rose and dished stew from the iron pot on to the first of the plates. It smelled wholesome and good, and the comfortable aroma pushed back the terrors in her mind. She dredged up a hesitant smile as she set the plate before the traveler, and was rewarded by an answering light of appreciation in his eyes. As Catalina cut bread, the brown-haired man began to eat, using the spoon set before him. The stew was hot and he sucked air in noisily with every mouthful. Catalina caught Liddi's eye, and smiled faintly despite her disquiet.

Thunder growled again. It was still a long way off, and Catalina's weather knowledge told her that it would come no closer but would continue to roll around the perimeter of the valley. Perhaps they would see the distant flicker of lightning, but nothing more. Then, unbidden, the face of her lost husband rose before her inner eye and,

Every seven years the pale wraith emerged again from her fastness, and walked down into the village to claim a new bridegroom. It always had been the way; it always would be the way; and nothing more could or should be said of it.

THE DOOR RATTLED SUDDENLY AND WITH ABNORMAL VIOLENCE on its old hinges, and Catalina started nervously, nearly spilling the stewpot over herself. Turning, she saw a pale blur of a face at the tiny window, and over the deepening hiss of the rain heard something scratching, scratching on the pane.

"It's Tynvar." Liddi sprang up and was half-way to the door before her mother had recovered. She fumbled with bar and latch, feeling small, malevolent gusts of air sneaking between the warped planks like something breathing wetly, and let her brother in.

Tynvar shook himself like a dog coming out of a river, water streaming from his fair hair and from the bullock hide that served as his foul-weather protection. Like Liddi, he spared no more than a quick smile and nod for the stranger, and his sister fussed him to the fire. Catalina watched until he was settled, then said: "Was it enough, Tynvar? Will it content her?"

"I think so, Mother." Tynvar clenched his jaw in an effort to stop his teeth chattering. "There are two hocks there bigger than ours, and some loaves, though they aren't properly covered and the rain's spoiled them. But no weaving as fine as your shawl. And — "He hesitated, not sure that he had done right—"I left a carving I made from that piece of bog-oak. A little mare and foal. It wasn't very skilled..."

Twelve years old, Catalina thought sadly, and he must shoulder the burdens his father should have carried. Aloud, she said, "You did right, Tynvar," then paused before asking, "Did you see ... anything else?"

Liddi noticed that the stranger had paused in his eating and was listening with interest, but before she could warn Tynvar to be circumspect the boy replied, "Enough, Mother." He shivered with more than the chill in him. "The shrine was shining, the way it sometimes does. And there were noises on the wind; like voices, but..." He shook his head and shrugged, lacking the words to define what he had heard. "I saw Old Man Parsider on the way back, and he said that the Flickerers are abroad. One settled on the roof of his cottage, he said, and it laughed at him before it flew away."

Forgetting her caution about the stranger, Liddi put in, "I saw one at the edge of the village. It had a cat's face, and it mewled." She shuddered.

"Parsider was afraid," Tynvar said. "He didn't want to admit it, but he thought the Flickerers choosing his roof might be a bad omen."

"They don't choose," Liddi argued. "They can't; they haven't got minds. Besides, she won't take Parsider. He's too old." She leaned toward her brother and added darkly, "Megann thinks it'll be Rengirt; she says —"

"Enough!" Catalina interrupted her sternly. "It's not healthy to think on such things, and I'll have no more talk of them under this roof." She pointed with her ladle at the scrubbed table. "Eat your food."

The stranger was mopping up the last juices from his plate with a piece of bread, and as she continued with her own meal Liddi slanted her eyes obliquely and studied him. He was older than she had first thought; his brown hair had faint gray streaks at the temples, and there were lines around his eyes that hadn't been visible until he leaned forward into the firelight. Irrationally, Liddi felt disappointed. Not that she could seriously have entertained any notions about him; but all the young men of the village were too well known to hold any mystery or excitement, and now that she was 16 and almost a grown woman it would have been pleasant to let fancy run away with her for a little while.

She wondered where the man had come from. His home must be a good distance away, she surmised; no one from hereabouts would dream of traveling on Tithing Night, so it followed that the stranger must be ignorant of the Sentinel and the payment she would demand before dawn. Odd that, though he had listened to their conversation, he had asked no questions. But then perhaps that was as well; and as well, too, if he were safely abed in the loft room under the eaves before the visitation.

Tynvar nudged her suddenly, and she realized that the stranger was aware of her scrutiny. Liddi reddened, self-consciously pushed her hair out of her eyes and tried to appear nonchalant, and the stranger smiled at her, making her blush the deeper. She returned energetically to her meal as Catalina took her own place at the table, and for some while there was silence but for the sounds of spoons in dishes, the sullen muttering of the fire as rain spluttered down the chimney, and the restless voice of the wind. Somewhere along the street an outhouse door was banging monotonously. No one would dare venture forth to secure it before dawn.

Catalina, who as always had eaten sparingly, cleared her own dish and offered the stranger more stew. He declined with a smile. "My stomach's better filled than it's been in many a day, mistress. I'm very obliged to you."

Catalina nodded acknowledgement and stacked the plates. "Then I'll prepare your bed, sir," she said. "Liddi, while I'm gone you can fetch a new jug of ale."

"Yes, Mother." Liddi slid out from behind the table and picked up

the big ewer that stood beside the stove. From the scullery, where the ale barrel was kept, she heard her mother climbing the ladder to the loft and, with no risk of incurring her rebuke, she ventured, on returning, to address the stranger directly for the first time.

"Can I serve you some ale, sir?"

He smiled at her. He had a nice smile, she thought. "Thank you, no." Liddi was a little piqued. "It's a good brew, sir."

"Nonetheless." He made a negative gesture. "I've had my fill. Your family's hospitality is more than generous."

Pointedly, Tynvar banged his own cup on the table top, and Liddi pushed the ewer toward him. She sat down again.

"He'd never turn a stranger away, sir. Especially not tonight."

"Ah, yes ... Tithing Night, I believe you call it?" He rummaged in a pouch buckled to his belt and produced a clay pipe and a twist of tobacco. It was seven years since a pipe had been smoked in the cottage, and Tynvar watched, fascinated, as their guest began to fill the bowl.

Liddi cast her eyes down. "You've heard of it, then?"

"The man who recommended me to your mother's care told me a little." He took a spill from the pot beside the fire and lit it. "He also told me of what befell your father."

Liddi wished she hadn't been so rash as to begin this conversation. She had needed to talk, for idle chatter helped to ease her fear and mask her thoughts about what the night would bring. But mention of her father had twisted the subject along too dark a path. To speak of his fate tonight could be a bad omen; as bad as the Flicker on Old Man Parsider's roof, for it might attract that which she prayed would not touch them a second time.

She glanced sidelong at Tynvar, but if her brother had been discomfited by the stranger's tactless reference he showed no sign. Best brave it, Liddi thought. She did not want to be discourteous.

"Father was taken seven years ago," she said, mumbling the words in the hope that whatever supernatural ears listened in the village tonight would not hear her.

"Seven years..." The stranger considered this information for a moment or two, puffing on his pipe. Blue-tinged smoke curled toward the fireplace, and Liddi breathed in the aromatic scent of the tobacco; it tickled her nose, but she liked it. "That's a long time to be without a man in the house. It must be hard for your mother."

Tynvar hunched his shoulders. He wanted to say — as he often said to Catalina when the sorrow of old memory overtook her — that he was a man now, and as good as any other; but he didn't have the courage to speak up. Liddi glanced at him, guessed his thoughts, and said more boldly, "Tynvar does well for you. He doesn't remember Father as I do, but I know Father would have been proud of him."

"I'm sure he would." The stranger nodded thoughtfully, then smiled at her again, this time in a way that sent a small thrill of pleasure through her. "So — Liddi, is it? I may call you Liddi?"

"Yes, yes, please..."

He seemed to like her name, and that, too, excited her. "Tell me, Liddi: When the white woman comes down from the mountain, is there any ritual that must be followed, any tradition to be obeyed? I'd not like to misuse your hospitality by doing anything wrong."

Her momentary excitement faded as his question brought back the all-too-familiar dread. "There is just one tradition, sir," she said. "We stay in our homes, with doors and shutters closed, and until dawn comes we do not look out into the street." She paused and touched her tongue to lips that were suddenly painfully dry. "Only the household at which she chooses to knock may see her face."

The stranger's eyes narrowed. "Seven years ago, Liddi... did you see her?"

"She did not, sir." Catalina's quiet voice startled them all, and they looked round to see her standing at the foot of the ladder. She had come down so quietly that they had not heard her, and now she looked at her daughter with pity laced with a thread of anger. "On the night my husband was taken, I was at least able to spare my children that."

The stranger cast his eyes down. "Forgive me, mistress. I had no business asking your daughter such a question."

Catalina shook her head. "It's of no moment, sir. Liddi shouldn't

have presumed to talk of such things to you." She approached the fire. "I've prepared your bed. The lodging is modest enough, but I believe you'll find it comfortable and clean."

"I'm sure I shall, and I thank you. But ..." He glanced at Liddi again, though she was too embarrassed to meet his gaze. "I wonder if I might crave your leave to sit on by the fire for a while?" He smiled at her, much as he had smiled at Liddi. "It's not a night for being alone with only one's thoughts for company."

Catalina clearly wasn't happy with the request, but she could hardly refuse it. "Of course, sir," she said. "Liddi, child, there's a dish of oatakes in the larder. Fetch them, and the jar of honey."

Liddi made to rise — then stopped, as somewhere deep in the chimney breast, a tiny breath of an inhuman voice laughed like a sweet, faraway bell. The fire spat and flared, and in its heart, just for an instant, she saw a twisted face that opened its mouth in a silent cry before dissolving back into embers.

Her heart began to pound in her breast and she looked fearfully at her mother. Catalina's eyes were haunted; in the uncertain light she looked suddenly far older than her years. But her voice, when she spoke, was level.

"Fetch the oatakes, Liddi, as I told you. And Tynvar; the shutters, if you please. Make sure they're secure, my son. "Serenely, she began to move to the door. The Sentinel was coming. Liddi felt the premonition of her presence, just as she had felt it seven years ago when the pale hand had knocked at their door. Her memories were cloudy, but as she turned to do her mother's calm bidding an image flicked across the surface of her mind. This same room, dark with the night and with the acrid smell of mortal fear; Tynvar, five years old and crying, her own face smothered by Catalina's apron as the cottage door shivered on its hinges to the rap, rap of the white woman's fingers. She remembered the sound of her father's slow, measured tread across the floor, and the touch of the cold wind that stole in like a fawning but treacherous dog as he eased the door open. It was the last memory she had of him. After that, there had been only the sensation of Catalina's body as she drew both children desperately to her, and the warm, salty taste of Liddi's own tears spilling down her cheeks and into her open, gasping, silent mouth.

Liddi shut her eyes, not wanting to revive those nightmares, as Tynvar rose from his seat and went quickly to the window. The shutters were on the inside; she heard his fingers fumbling with the catch that secured them. Then he said, his voice low-pitched and fearful: "Mother ..."

Liddi couldn't stop herself from looking. Beyond the rain-washed pane of the window, out in the dark street, there was a light. Not the friendly glow of the lamps, but a gray, phosphorescent haze that shone steadily, like the Moon seen through soft fog. Tynvar's face was etched by the light into sharp, colorless relief, his eyes wide with fascination; he would have continued to stare out like a mesmerized rabbit but for Catalina, who crossed the floor in three quick strides, snatched the shutter from his hand, and slammed it.

The glow vanished and Tynvar stumbled back as the spell broke. Catalina did not speak, only smiled with grim pity at her son before turning back to the door and setting the heavy bolt. The grating thud as she shot it home made Liddi jump, and gooseflesh prickled her arms and the back of her neck.

They were secure now. She repeated the assurance to herself in a silent litany as she forced her legs to carry her to the larder. She fetched the oatakes and honey and, as every household in the village would do tonight, gathered an extra plate to set on the table. Tynvar was back at his place by the fire, and as Liddi set her burden down, Catalina lowered the wick of the oil lamp until only a dim, warm glow competed with the firelight. Liddi sat, and watched as her mother performed the small ritual of placing two oatakes on a plate and spreading them with a generous helping of honey before pushing the plate to the exact center of the table. An offering to show the powers of Chaos that their Sentinel was welcomed and her tithe not grudged; yet low light to make their cottage inconspicuous, so that she might be drawn to another hearth tonight.

There was no more to be done. Catalina sat down and, clasping

her hands in her lap, bowed her head and seemed to drift off into a personal reverie. Tynvar fidgeted, fingering a spoon, while Liddi found the courage to look at the stranger again. Although his posture was relaxed enough, he was alert; his gaze moved discerningly about the room, brown eyes reflecting the orange-red of the fire. Once he caught her eye and smiled briefly; with an effort she smiled back but said nothing.

Outside, the wind stalked among the huddled rooftops with a mournful sound that made Liddi think reluctantly of old women's funeral keening. A backdraft in the chimney added a thin, hooting note of its own, and even through the latched shutters she could hear rain pattering on the window like a myriad tiny, scurrying feet. She tried not to visualize the empty street beyond the cottage walls, the cobbles glistening with wet, the houses darkened under the mountain's brooding night shadow, gray wraiths of cloud scudding like blown smoke, the river chattering in spate under the old flint bridge. She tried not to see an image of the stony road that came down from the mountains' great granite folds, nor to imagine the inhuman forms, creatures as insubstantial as light and air which, released from their haunted stronghold, fluttered and danced and skimmed along that ancient way to herald the Sentinel's approach. But the phantoms of her imagination would not release her. She shut her eyes and it seemed they moved in the room, touching her, hovering among her loved ones ... She bit her lip and felt tears squeezing between her tight-closed lids.

Then a hand touched hers, and she started, blinking and looking.

The stranger was leaning forward, and in the dim light she could see kindness and sympathy in his eyes. "Don't be afraid, Liddi."

She was afraid, and she couldn't disguise it. She shook her head mutely, trying to thank him and yet express something of what she felt. He patted her fingers gently, then withdrew his hand and the room was silent once more.

The village waited. The rain fell harder, forming tiny, rushing rivulets along the street, turning the offerings heaped about the shrine beyond the last cottage into sodden, shapeless bundles. No dogs barked, no lambent-eyed cats lurked between houses where the mice ran. Names paraded through Liddi's mind, names from the village history she had learned as a child, and she couldn't halt the procession. Old men, young men, the blacksmith, the carter's lad, the boys who herded cows or worked the delta fields. Who would it be this time? Whose chair would be empty when morning broke?

Then at last, following the elemental retinue of darting lights, disembodied faces, yammering voices, came the tread of bare feet, the rustle of a hem, the swish of a cloak on which no rain fell. By the shrine something paused, but only briefly before moving on toward the first of the hunched cottages. Old, old eyes gazed on shuttered windows and barred doors; thoughts that no mortal would have wished to comprehend flowed through the mind behind the eyes. The feet moved on, slowed. Stopped. Turned. Moved again.

And a pale hand rapped three times on the door of Catalina's cottage.

Liddi felt her world shattering around her. Horror fused with desperation and a wild, frantic protest that she couldn't articulate, as she sprang to her feet and the stool on which she had been sitting crashed to the floor. Her eyes met Catalina's, and Catalina's face was dead-white, her body locked fixedly with shock and disbelief.

"Mother ..." Liddi's voice had no strength, and came out as a thin mew. Tynvar, her mind screamed; not Tynvar, great gods of Chaos, please, not Tynvar!

Very slowly, Catalina rose. Her hands were shaking violently as she tried to get a grip on the table edge, and though she tried with all her will, she could not turn her head to look at her son. Her mouth worked spasmodically but at first she could make no sound. When she finally forced her throat to obey her, her voice was unrecognizable.

"What must be, must be. It's not for us to question. Tynvar ..." She shut her eyes, biting her tongue hard in an effort to maintain control. "Tynvar, my son, you must open the door."

Why? Liddi thought anguishily. Why us? Why our house again?

She tried to turn, tried to break the barrier of blind terror that kept her from her stunned and immobile brother and reach out to him for what must be the last time.

Then a voice behind her said—

"No, Tynvar. The summons is not for you."

Liddi spun round as though someone had slapped her, and saw the stranger on his feet. There was no trace of fear in his face; his expression was extraordinarily serene.

"Mistress," He bowed to Catalina. "I must take my leave. Thank you for your kindness; I wish you and yours well."

All three stared at him, not daring to accept that what he implied was possible. He was a stranger, not a village man — he had no rightful part in the tithing. Yet he was crossing the room, moving toward the door, as though he had known all along that the Sentinel's touch would fall on him tonight.

With a sudden, convulsive movement Catalina, clasped Tynvar. Her face was distorted and ugly with a desperate need to believe in this miracle, and she tried to speak to the stranger, but words were beyond her. The stranger drew the bolt and touched the door latch, then paused. His smile was for Liddi alone.

"Until another time, Liddi," he said, and opened the door.

Liddi couldn't look. Part of her wanted to see what awaited him out there in the rain-drenched dark, but her fear was too great. She closed her eyes and turned her head away. There was a sound like a sigh, and a chill tongue of wind breathed across the room. Then the door closed, juddering on its hinges, and the stranger was gone.

Catalina released her hold on Tynvar and collapsed onto her chair. She slumped forward, hands clasped tightly before her forehead,

To either side the mountain walls rose higher with each step he took, until he was enfolded by black crags whose ragged summits were lost in night and cloud. In the dark there were eyes within crevices, slitherings and rustlings under fallen slabs of stone, small sounds that were neither human nor animal — whispers, giggles, shrill, piping squeals that faded without echoes. He looked neither to right nor left. Only walked on...

Until before him was something which neither time nor erosion had created. Two massive pillars of black granite, rising at either side of the track and linked by a soaring portal arch. There were vast faces in the pillars; not carved by any hand, he knew, but petrified in the stone, and in their jagged features was every emotion, every fear, every glory, and every horror that the mind could conjure. The white woman reached the arch, which dwarfed her, and looked back. For the first time he saw her face, though not clearly. Then she turned again and he followed her silent footsteps.

The arch was a mouth opening to swallow him; the faces in the granite pillars glared down with insensate eyes. He passed between them, never faltering, into the canyon beyond. Then as the white woman continued to move deeper into the titanic fissure, he halted, and he called her name.

The word went ringing into the canyon's depths in a clamor of hollow echoes, and he saw her stop as though huge, invisible hands had gripped her. This time she did not turn. Instead she waited, immobile as the frozen faces in the pillars, until the moment when he reached her and his hand passed through the nacreous light of her aura to touch her shoulder as gently as a bird alighting. And again he spoke her name.



LD, OLD EYES GAZED ON SHUTTERED WINDOW
AND BARRED DOORS; THOUGHTS THAT NO
MORTAL WOULD HAVE WISHED TO COMPREHEND
FLOWED THROUGH THE MIND BEHIND THE EYES.

and Liddi heard her brokenly whispering a fervent prayer of thanks. Tynvar stared at her numbly, and Liddi was about to go to her side when she saw something shining on the table.

A single coin. She picked it up, turned it over in the firelight and realized that it was gold. Payment for a night's lodging, which would never now be taken... She blinked, suppressing an inward shudder. The stranger would have no need of money now...

She set the coin gently down on the table again and, folding her hands, joined in Catalina's heartfelt prayer.

SHE WAITED BEYOND THE SHRINE, AT THE PLACE WHERE THE knapped flint of the last village walls gave way to shale and tumbled boulders at the mountain foot. Through the rain blowing against his face he could see her only as a tenuous phantom shrouded in a faintly shimmering aura that drained her of any color. Her hair was a bitterly white cascade, her gray cloak pale and unreal as gossamer, her hand spider-veined as she gestured toward the dim ribbon of the road ahead.

He followed her past the silent cottages and under the dim beacon of the last street lamp. At the shrine he hesitated as she had done, his eyes taking in the collection of sorry and bedraggled offerings. Then he walked on.

They left the village behind, and the road began to climb. Now it seemed that the only light in the world was the glimmer of the aura surrounding the white woman, a will-o'-the-wisp in the dark ahead.

She turned now, and looked full into his face. She might have been human once, and must have been very beautiful. But even the memory of humanity was long gone from her, and though her features looked youthful her skin was pure white and thin and sear as centuries-old parchment in its frame of snowy, brittle hair. She had known life, but she had devoured all that life could give her until there was no more to be found. Although the souls she had summoned from their cottages below the mountain had merged with her own soul and granted her respite from lonely emptiness, now in the desert of her face only her eyes reflected what she had once been. Her eyes burned. They had gazed broodingly down upon the village that it was her sacred task to guard; they had looked into the hearts of the hapless ones from whom she took her title and who could not understand that they were exalted by it; now, they blazed with longing for that which for centuries had been denied to her.

She knew who the stranger was, and why he had come.

Many generations had lived and died in the village below the mountain since she had last spoken aloud. When her colorless lips parted and the first breath of sound issued from her throat, it was like the tinder-dry rustle of old, dead leaves.

"My prayer has been answered..."

"Yes." He pitied her; pitied what the centuries had made her. "You are released."

"Released..." She felt joy in her desiccated heart, but had long

Continued on page 72



*Peni Griffin is known for her children's stories —
this is definitely not one of them!*

Fata

there are some things that a man needs to do...

PENI R. GRIFFIN

Illustration by J. K. Potter

"Are you sure," I said, "that this is what you want?"
"Oh, yes," he said, shuddering; so I took him.

The chase had been long and gratifyingly intense. Nowadays I rarely obsess. I tease a man for a night or two, and he shoots me, or seeks mortal women in disgust. This one was like old times again — alert and eager from the moment he first glimpsed me singing by the waters. He had pursued me, now, for over a month, trailing me by laughter and light footsteps across three counties. I was well-satisfied, and he was pale, drawn, and wild-eyed. Some of my sisters have a taste for leaving men alone and palely loitering, but once a mortal man has satisfied me, I see no reason not to satisfy him.

Not that he will be.

Besides, the lust of mortals has its own satisfactions.

This man had his faults as a lover, but his headlong fire was flattering. "Oh, you beauty!" he shuddered in my ear. "God, I feel like my hands could go right through you, you're so soft. When I saw you it was like the world stopped turning. It was like that'd never been a woman before — oh, yes, do that again! That's wonderful!" The voice in which he said "Wonderful!" made a melody of the word, would've lured a bird out of a tree.

When my mouth was not otherwise occupied, I laughed. They're so cute when they're passionate.

After a time his speech melted into grunts and moans, squeezing me till I had difficulty matching my breathing to his. I was braced to take advantage of the right moment in which to dissolve (he had given me a month of pleasure; I had no desire to harm him) when the cold barrel of a gun poked between us.

It spoiled his timing. He squawked and rolled into a patch of poison ivy, which I had carelessly overlooked when selecting the spot for capture. The woman, swollen and pale behind the dark leanness of the shotgun, kept the barrel steady on me. "I'd've had you an hour ago, you little slut, if the tire hadn't gone flat," she hissed.

"Now honey," he said, covering himself with his shirt.

"Don't you 'now honey' me," she snapped. "I'll talk to you after I blow her brains across the prairie!"

I could have dissolved, but I was curious. I folded my hair around me and awaited developments.

"You don't want to do that!" he said, pulling his jeans back on. "What are you doing out here? It's not good for the baby."

"Oh, now you think about the baby!" She let the gun droop. "Why didn't you think about that when you dropped your job to chase after this tramp? It's bad enough, you running after Nancy and Lisa and all like that, but I can't believe you lit out for a whole month after this — this —"

"Will you relax?" he demanded. "I keep telling you, they don't make any difference! And this one —" His eyes strayed back to me. "Look at her! How can you think she's

like a normal woman? I've seen her flicker out like a —"

"It don't make any difference what she is!" she said, with shrill voice that seemed to wriggle through too small an opening in her throat. "It's what you are that matters. You're my baby's daddy —"

"Me or Fred Rodriguez, one," he cut in, buttoning his shirt.

Her face contorted and the shotgun wavered limply as she howled: "There ain't any Fred Rodriguez! There hasn't ever been anybody but you! Why can't you see that? I love you!"

Mention of Fred Rodriguez seemed to have shifted control into his hands. Partly, I suppose, because her face was in flood. "Then you're just going to have to understand that there are some things that a man needs to do," he said firmly. "You don't want to be one of these women tries to keep her man on a chain, do you? You wouldn't want me to turn into one of these poor henpecked slob that can't do anything without they ask the old lady?"

She swung her head from side to side, dumbly, struggling to speak.

"Because baby or no baby, I wouldn't stay with a woman like that. A man's got to keep his self-respect. Now why don't you go on back to the truck and I'll be with you pretty soon? We'll go on home and I'll take care of you and Junior there." Firmness hardened to sternness. "I bet you haven't been to the doctor or eaten right or anything. You can't run around all over everywhere now. You got to think of the baby first."

She looked small and forlorn under the high star-speckled sky as she made her way back to the road, plodding misshapenly between the shadows. She had not gone half the distance when he slipped out of his jeans again — never zipped, for he hadn't had time to search for his underthings — and returned to me. "Sorry about that," he said. "She's pretty stupid, and she goes off her rocker sometimes, but I can handle her."

"So I see," I said, lifting my eyes from her retreating form.

The shudder returned to his voice as he began to talk again, about how beautiful I was, and how ardently he wanted me. It wasn't fun anymore, but I took him.

And took him.

And took him.

And took him, till he screamed for mercy; but I kept taking him, till he was nothing but rags of skin and a staring pair of eyes draped over a framework of bone. An early vulture circled once in the dawn before flying in search of better meat. I stretched and rippled my hair.

She got out of the truck and gazed sullenly toward me. I waved and melted away.

I did it for her sake.

Not that she'll thank me. *is*

MODERN CLASSICISM

THE GILDED WORLD OF RICHARD BOBER

BY JANE FRANK

Intricate detail and rich color, multiple layers of transparent oil glazes (up to ten, on the average, filling every inch of hand-primed belgian linen canvasses. Such distinctive features of an artist's style can be described with words, but cannot be fully savored except by those lucky enough to see one of Richard Bober's paintings in the original.

This is modern classicism at its best; this is representational art by someone who *knows* how to paint. This is where illustration art becomes fine art.

With astounding attention to the kind of decorative embellishment normally associated with the kinds of "set pieces" and highly romanticized compositions of a 19th century English style, and with the grand quality of execution that we expect from Dutch masters of the 16th century, Bober produces visually arresting, intricately fashioned and very colorful fantasy images. Panoramic scenes crowded with fantastic fig-

ures and architectural (and archaeological) paraphernalia; imaginary castles and intimate portraits of literary fiction — all spectacularly, if painstakingly, produced over a period of months.

To the acute consternation of those who trust in Richard's talent, he takes his time.

Clients, collectors and agents eagerly await his few paintings per year that pass muster. Of his work, his commissioning agent (and well-known professional artist in her own right) Jill Bauman, says "as an illustrator myself, I fully understand the artist mentality. I can exercise great patience as I witness perfectionism, fixation, obsession, for all these things are a part of great art. Richard never compromises artistic integrity for the sake of a deadline imposed by publishers." Luckily, there are enough publishers, editors and art directors who appreciate the fineness of his work to allow for this kind of dedication. Because what this artist may risk by flirting with deadlines, he more than makes up with quality.

His illustrations range from majestic landscapes to finely detailed Arabian Night scenes, from strongly designed mysteries to richly conceived fantasies. Many have the



Richard Bober's cover for Stephen Goldin's *Shrine of the Desert Mage*, from the series *Parsina Saga*, published by Bantam Books. **BELOW LEFT:** "Skull Life," one of Bober's *Nitchcock-Presents* covers for Dell Books.



Dragon Fall, originally seen as a book cover for Avon Books, is scheduled to be available as a limited-edition print. NEAR RIGHT: "Glorantha" was painted for the cover to Avalon Hill's game, Rune Quest. FAR RIGHT: Bober's cover for the recent novel by Michaela Roessner, *The Stars Dispose*, published by Tor Books.





feel of 17th century Haarlem, in terms of their rich texturing and painterly execution. The artist confesses he often feels just like the movie actor Erol Flynn, who — known for his swash-buckling adventure roles, once declared “I was born in the wrong century”. Bober says “The 1600s in Holland, that’s where I’d feel most comfortable. Ah, to be the peer of Rembrandt, Franz Hals! Artists who didn’t try to hide use of paint, who obviously painted, whose media is apparent, the process is visible, and isn’t hidden under a smooth satiny finish”.

A discriminating reader’s unerring eye for stand-out dust jacket design is drawn to the sumptuously grand book illustrations Bober creates. Susan Schwartz, two of whose most recent novels (*Shards of Empire*, and *Cross and Crescent*, to be released in December 1997) have been illustrated with Bober’s covers, was delighted to hear that he’d been commissioned for the job, “Because they are historical fantasies set in the Byzantine Empire (and) I had heard he researched his paintings, and worked in oils, which I think gives his work the richest possible texture,” adding “I’m impressed by the intricacy of his backgrounds and the expressiveness of his faces.”

Author Esther Friesner, whose first three *Chronicles of the Twelve Kingdoms* books for Avon Publishers (in the 1980’s) had covers by Bober, notes, “writers get no say in what goes on the covers of their books,” so she was “delighted to have such gorgeous artwork as Bober’s on my very first fantasy

novel ever (*Mustapha*). Wonderful bejeweled colors, and the aura of exotic, fantastic realms. Marvellous.”

This view is echoed by noted author Gene Wolfe. “I think he’s better on interiors than anything else,” he says, citing as example the palace scene Bober produced for the cover of *Exodus of the Long Sun*. “He can give them a richness of detail and a feeling of opulence that you simply don’t get with other artists,” Wolfe notes, adding “you get the sense that there are people who live in the palace who not only have a tremendous amount of wealth at their disposal to buy good art, but also the good taste to appreciate it.”

Interestingly, Bober — albeit sans wealth — exemplifies just the person Wolfe imagines inhabiting that palace. Unapologetically reclusive, he is well informed, and thoughtfully conversant on a wide range of topics, from history to classical music (he is especially fond of Berlioz while he works) to the latest computer game for Sony Play Station. He loves to play, and currently relaxes with *Rally Cross* and *Twisted Metal II* for about 20 minutes a day, although his love doesn’t extend to attempting computer-designed art, which he holds in rather low esteem.

Bober can’t abide cities, and his studies at the Pratt Institute and The Art Student’s League (NY) were doomed from the start. For no one had the slightest interest in furthering the education of a representational artist with “zero interest” in producing abstract art in the style of De Kooning, Pol-

lack, etc., circa 1965. Neither Richard’s father, who he says “had a heart attack on the assembly line” in the cause of sending him to art school, nor his position as the eldest of four younger siblings, could deter him from his obsession with figurative painting — out of vogue though it may have been.

Bober persevered and conquered — over establishment objections — contributing to exhibitions at the National Academy of Design, and winning the ‘Raven’ award from The Mystery Writer’s Association. Bober’s works also have since been featured in several museum shows and gallery exhibitions across the country, including the Delaware Art Museum, Illustration House, and most recently the Canton Museum of Art in Canton, Ohio.

There are several steps involved in creating Bober’s illustrative masterpieces. Generally, as the first step, he receives a description from the art director or his agent, and produces a color sketch. Once approved from that sketch Bober creates an underpainting of the entire painting on canvas in acrylics, done almost white; much lighter than the final. Bober doesn’t especially enjoy working in acrylics, but finds it useful at this step in the process because it dries so quickly.

The final painting is produced in a series of layers, a combination of oil paints and oil glazes, created by mixing the oil paints with liquid (alkyd resin) medium which makes the oil paints transparent, flexible, and stronger, and linseed oil, to slow down the



Stone, Telles, and the Jara is Bober's cover to Stephenie Garlin's *Panama Saga: Book 3*. RIGHT: "Col. Warring's Ra Party" is one of Bober's most memorable paintings, circa 1983.



fast drying time created by the alkyd medium. "With oils," says Bober, "you get a richer saturated color, like on a TV set, colors 'past normal', and I like that effect."

In this process, each layer has to dry completely before the next which is why he sometimes misses deadlines. He needs to work slowly, so the paint can dry. "If I work too quickly," he says, "it destroys the layer beneath." Amazingly, the shimmering golden effects, the gilding that viewers believe literally to be the result of applying gold or silver paint to the surface, are the result of Bober's incredible artistic technique; the gold isn't gold — it's all just oil paint and glazes.

But while Bober in his illustrative art has successfully ignored the constraints on size and photographically realistic style of expression which generally has accompanied commissioned book cover work in the last decade, he nevertheless often goes way beyond the expected when developing personal works.

For example, he has been working on his monumental *Jason and the Argonauts* (aka *Variation on a Theme by Harryhausen*) for two years, with no end in sight. The work in progress is on imported Belgian linen, about twelve (Bober is unclear!) feet wide, and eight feet high, and required the construction

of a specially fabricated stretcher frame — which after complex assembly turned out to be too large to fit in his studio. Presently situated in his garage, for want of workable space, and naturally lit by a skylight constructed by his brother, it is the largest piece Bober has ever attempted on canvas. When pressed for what exhibition plans he might have in mind for this heroically sized painting after its completion, he changes the subject; indeed he seems to have no interest whatsoever in the implications of completing a canvas as large as this.

In the meantime, he is content to continue as he has since the 1970s, taking on private commissions and freelance commercial assignments, carefully turning out illustrative works without peer. Bauman says, "in this era of hard-edged, overly photographically referenced, air-brushed, computer generated art Richard has all the magic, wonder and originality of a true 'artist.'" Richard's take on the situation is a bit different. When he enters his studio, he says "I enter another world, and I'm just going along for the ride." ■

For information about the availability of Richard Bober's work contact: Jane Frank, *Worlds of Wonder®*, PO Box 814, McLean VA 22101, (703) 847-4251, e-mail: wowart1@erols.com



*All happy families are happy in the same way.
All unhappy families are unhappy in their own way.
Here a woman must truly lay her past to rest.*

THE QUEEN OF YESTERDAY

There was no color to the evening air, no flavor or weight. It arched over the hills like a transparent shell: the essence of sky made into a lens to stop time and hold the long clear moment between light and dark.

Rona climbed the last few steps to the top of the hill. Only a few minutes ago there had been a breeze, but it died as the Sun sank. She found a rock to sit on, and after a while began to feel comfortably balanced, as if her body were exactly the air's temperature, some absolutely perfect degree maintained only by acceptance of the necessity of stillness.

The air smelled of dust and sage and sun-baked stone. The faint musty stench of bat and bat guano was there too; she hadn't smelled it until now.

The cave entrance was below her to the south. The infrared binoculars were ready beside her in their lightproof case, but everything else could wait until tomorrow. The harp trap, looking much like its name with its boxy shape and close-strung nylon line; the mist nets; the bat detector, whose name always made her smile.

Recording forms, gloves, extra tapes for the tape recorder, a down vest should it get chilly later. Paraphernalia. Tomorrow night, when the grant and their official permission to be here

BY SALLY MCBRIDE
Illustration by Alan Pollack

kicked in, she and her two undergrad assistants would haul all the stuff up to the cave mouth and get to work.

And after that? Well, after that she might not need any of it any more.

Something small and quick rustled in the bushes behind her and scampered off. Another creature anticipating the night, as ready for darkness as she was and as unable to stay under cover and wait.

The bats would be out at any moment. Rona loved darkness, loved how her ears could hear almost as well as bats' did. Almost. It was something she didn't let other people know about, gathering her data in the acceptably electronic way instead.

When factored down by the detector from the ultrasonic, bats' hunting voices sounded very much like marbles being dropped rhythmically onto a sheet of galvanized tin. She'd spent hours listening to their eerie, bouncing cries, trying to understand what they were saying to one another. Pin-sharp squeals of airborne glee, slowed into a metallic language and still undecipherable.

She breathed in the night's dry pungency, her eyes half closed. *Will my body cool on this windless hillside so that dew forms on my skin? Will I at last become one with the night, and will the bats fly down to me? Will coyotes come on their quiet feet and sniff me? If they dare...*

She smiled, liking the idea, and shivered a little at what she was going to do. She'd reel what she wanted out of the night, gathering magic the way hungry fishermen netted fish. It was hers, after all; her magic.

A bat flicked across her vision and she turned her head instinctively to follow it, but it was much too fast and erratic. More came, she could hear their thin voices and the fluttering of their little leathery wings, flap-flap, sounding close and businesslike. Then a real flurry swirled past, swift flakes of black against a horizon of glowing tangerine, performing the airy dance they'd practiced for millennia.

Rona left the night glasses in their case. Soon the bats all disappeared, off to the soft, irrigated lowlands where the insects were plump and stupid and full of poison.

The smell of cigarette smoke let Rona know she wasn't alone. There was someone to her right farther down the hill. She smiled again into the dark, forcing herself to sit still for another minute and look up at the first white stars in the sky above her. Then she stood, took one long deep breath and let it out slowly, and started down the hill toward the smoke, her night-adjusted eyes taking her down a narrow path hedged with a web of dry black branches, dappled with knots of silent leaves. Not a rustle, not a breath of wind under the sky, only her scuffing feet and little rattles of pebbles knocked loose.

The smoker, a woman, was sitting watching the night, her bare knees drawn up against her chest.

"You shouldn't smoke up here," Rona said, stopping a few feet away and looking at her. "It's dry as tinder."

The woman frowned and gave her a long dark look, then shrugged and ground the cigarette out on the rock. She hugged her muscular thighs, and said in a low, husky voice, "You're right, of course. But I am very careful. These hills are mine, and I don't risk them."

"Actually, they're university endowment lands, have been since 1937." The woman looked away from her. Take it easy, thought Rona. You'll piss her off, and she'll never talk to you again.

The woman stood up, brushing off the seat of her shorts. She was small, no more than 5 foot 2, but so perfectly proportioned that she gave the impression of being imposingly tall. Her hair absorbed what little light there was, reflecting nothing, and her eyes were black pits. She moistened her lips with a quick movement of her tongue, and Rona watched the soft gleam on them, the only spark in the night.

After a pause, the woman said, "Perhaps I should have said they used to be my hills." She turned to go.

Rona raised her hand. "Ambar, wait." *Don't reach for her, don't touch her.* "I'm sorry. I'm here to study the bat colony, I really am. I'm with the university now, you know that." *See? I'm a real person, I have an important career, and I did it on my own.*

Ambar. Amber. Rona could almost see the honey-gleam around

her flesh, encasing her away from ordinary life. Ordinary time.

"Of course I knew it. I just didn't expect you." Ambar fumbled in her pocket for her cigarettes, changed her mind. "I didn't expect ever to see you again." She seemed almost confused, but maybe she was just being clever, trying to seem less than she was. Rona's heart thumped fast, loud in her own ears. Could Ambar hear it too?

Rona, for Corona, the crown. My crown is yet to be gained, if I have the strength.

"We'll be here for a couple of weeks, just me and two students, observing and capturing a few bats for tagging and measuring. That sort of thing."

"I see."

"You'll hardly know we're here."

THE NEXT MORNING, RONA SPENT AN HOUR OBSERVING THE AREA around the entrance to the cave, estimating the amount of human interference by the state of the vegetation and the frequency and apparent age of litter. She dutifully made notes on local conditions, weather, phase of the Moon, presence of water, and nearness of human habitation.

She squinted up at the cave entrance. It would be difficult for the average vandal to reach, for it was only a narrow slit quite high off the little-trodden path, barely wide enough for a person to squeeze in. The last time anyone actually had gone in was in 1979, and that had been a man named James MacMurdy from U.C. Irvine who was aware of protocol and had written up a short paper, which she'd read.

Rona poked around for a while making notes into her tape recorder and snapping a few photos, then sat down on a smooth stone to eat her lunch.

In the past two years she'd deduced a lot. She'd learned things she should have been taught at her mother's knee; instead she had to unearth them painfully, fact by snippet by guess, well aware that she was doing so against the undertow of Ambar's displeasure. Now the time had come to put the random facts and snippets to the test; now she would meet the magic in the place where it dwelt.

Crunching sweet red pepper sticks, she looked down the hill. Below her was a large Spanish-style house with a stone wall around it. Ambar Monserrat's house. Rona could see green lawns inside the wall, and a big swimming pool surrounded by slate-gray tiling, and at the front of the house a glimpse of paved space for cars to turn. Big spreading trees cast shade over the roof. No one was in the pool, and no cars were visible.

As she watched, a woman emerged from the house, plunged into the pool, and began to do laps. The Sun caught the gleam of black hair, wet brown shoulders pulling at the water, a small froth churning behind.

Rona counted 20 laps without a pause before she gathered her things and headed back to the van.

SHE CLICKED THE COUNTER WITH HER THUMB AT EVERY 10, THE heavy binoculars propped on her knee and trained on the cave's entrance. It was an extremely rough estimate, for the bats were fitting out of their cave in groups and flocks of hazy green bodies against a dimly glowing green background, and looked just as if they were being yanked around erratically on little jagged tracks before disappearing into the night.

Ninety, one hundred, one ten, twenty ... Rona clicked diligently. Terry and Amrit had dropped her off and then headed to the spot they'd chosen to record hunting cries. She'd been relieved when they'd left, two serious, talkative boys who snacked relentlessly on apples and trail mix, and whose energetic bounding up and down the hill bearing equipment had rendered her almost incapable of speech. She'd wanted them gone so badly she had almost struck Terry at one point, stopping herself in fear that she might really hurt him. She had blurted some sarcastic remark instead; he hadn't seemed to mind. Probably used to it. *I must be a bitch to work for.*

So. Five hundred and twentyish gyrating bats. If nothing else came from tonight, she would at least have some data. She put the

binoculars down and tucked the counter back into her equipment bag, pulled out a sweater, and shrugged it on. Rona could feel her ears actually twitch, like a cat's, as she heard the sound of footsteps farther down the hill.

She trained the binoculars into the blackness. At once the night brightened and filled with detail she'd forgotten was there. Somehow she always expected night to be stripped down compared to day's visual clutter, smoothed and simplified by darkness into something as softly contoured as the bottom of the ocean.

Twigs and pebbles sprang into existence as she looked at them, dimensionless panoramas of gray-green. She searched slowly across the hill and stopped at a glowing woman climbing purposefully up the slope toward her, striding along like a dream and leaving a slight golden trail in the air behind her.

It was Ámbar, as she'd known it would be; the swimmer, the night-walker; her Spanish cheekbones strobing slightly, the black pits of her eyes and mouth making her look like a walking corpse. The black mouth stretched wide into a ghostly grin that made Rona shudder involuntarily.

Ámbar neared the top of the little rise, and Rona lowered her binoculars.

"Hello," Ámbar said. "You're up here again. Don't you find it boring, all this creeping about at night?"

"No, I don't," replied Rona. She turned to stare upward at the cave entrance, black against black. "It's my work." *Damn you, look up there.* She pointed at a brief swirl, just two or three little bodies. "These bats are under siege. People fear them, try to kill them. Cats and coyotes eat them, pesticides sicken them. They probably don't have a chance."

Ámbar flashed a charming smile at Rona, as if she hadn't been listening at all. *Perhaps she has a knife, and wants to carve me up as a sacrifice to the bat-god Zotzilaha. Now wouldn't that be interesting.* "They hunt such small prey, do they not?" she said. "One wonders how they live. You know, I have photographs from the turn of the century of the sky black with bats. A wonderful sight."

"You've never talked to me about it. You've never included me in what you did. I have no idea who you are." Rona stopped talking, hearing the tightness in her own voice.

There was an uncomfortable pause, then Ámbar, still smiling, held out her hand, a gleam of naked flesh under the stars. Her wrist turned, the fingers spreading in invitation. It took Rona a second to realize this and reach out in response for a brief, hot clasp that felt like some sort of galvanic test. What could it mean? Rona drew her hand back and tried to prevent herself from wiping it on her jeans.

"Come down to the house."

"I'd better not," she said stubbornly. "I've got work to do." Can she read my mind? Can she divine my intentions with one look from those black eyes? Of course I want to come down; I want to come home. Why, after all this time, is she asking me now?

"I want you to come."

"To please you."

"To please me."

Rona nodded, held her arm to be taken, allowed Ámbar's muscular hands to guide her down the hill. There was almost enough light coming from the sky to see the path, just enough to

SOMETHING
SMALL
AND
QUICK
RUSTLED IN
THE BUSHES
BEHIND HER
AND
SCAMPERED
OFF.
ANOTHER
CREATURE
ANTICIPATING
THE NIGHT,
AS READY FOR
DARKNESS
AS SHE WAS...

make feet take chances.

"I have learned," said Ámbar obliquely, "that everything has its time to die."

They reached level ground. Ámbar went ahead, and they clambered over a sagging wire fence and stepped carefully through spiky weeds and bits of unraveled wire.

There was a small wooden door in the stone wall; they passed through it into groomed moistness, where the ornamental shrubs had obviously just been watered by some automatic sprinkler system. The air smelled completely different on this side of the wall, as if they had crossed over into another realm. Rona stood still for a moment, breathing it in.

Behind the modern trappings was a real Spanish hacienda, old, low to the ground as if it had been there much longer than its three hundred years, and very well kept. Her eyes adjusted to the house lights picking out corners, shining on glossy black leaves and flag stones glistening with water.

Ámbar opened an ordinary, homey door made of thick varnished wood, that led directly into a big kitchen on the east side of the house. She strode through this quiet, tiled room without stopping, into a room half-filled with a huge dining table and its dozen chairs, and Rona followed.

A light snapped on, almost intolerably bright to her night-adjusted eyes though it was only a small desk lamp. Its green shade hunched greedily over its little pool of illumination. Ámbar shuffled among papers and stationery items piled haphazardly on the top of the big mahogany desk, and started pulling out drawers. Rona hung back and looked around the room, which seemed to be in use more as a study or office, with French doors letting out onto the pool enclosure. She prowled across and looked through the glass, her arms crossed over her breasts. The water in the pool was still and black, here and there reflecting placid gleams, gathering light somehow out of nothing. The house smelled like furniture oil and cigarette smoke.

"Ah, here they are." Ámbar straightened, one hand full of stiff sepiaprints.

She went to the table and moved two heavy silver candlesticks out of the way, and spread the photos out. Rona peered at them, bending close. They were indeed quite good shots of the evening sky absolutely full of bats. In one she recognized the very ridge she'd been standing on, the dark slit of the cave entrance black against gray. The vegetation was quite different, a couple of tree trunks thrusting stiffly across the frame and shagging their graceful branches down. Another was a picture of two women in antique garb, one with a Native American height to her cheekbones, the other Ámbar, unmistakably.

Rona looked up.

Ámbar had a long metal letter opener in her hands and was toying with it, twirling it around in her fingers.

"It has taken you a long time to come to me," she said quietly. "You were so anxious to get away, then."

Rona barked a little laugh. "Get away? I was sent away! You didn't want me around, you couldn't bear the sight of me."

She made herself stand straight, gripping the edge of the table with both hands, as if it were a dock and she a swimmer about to push off into very deep water. "You refused to tell me anything. You

let me know I was unworthy. You got rid of me." Ámbar snorted softly. "If you say so. And what of it? We are not humans who can nest together—we need room."

Rona felt tears of anger prick her eyelids. "I'm kept away from the place I most wish to enter." Ámbar spread her arms wide. "Well, now you are here."

And suddenly, with her arms still up like wings, she made a springing leap too fast to follow and was across the room. She was still angry immediately, bending to shut off the little green-shaded light before Rona could turn her head. "Ah. That's better. As long as the air is warm, I love darkness best. Don't you?"

Rona waited for her eyes to adjust, forcing herself not to move, not to react. It wouldn't take long to be able to see again, it never did. The darkness crisped up and things became visible again, like swimming into clear water.

I have six inches on her, and I'm younger—oh, how much younger?—but I doubt I could best her in a fight. All those laps in the pool, those shoulders like thick silk ropes. I'm stronger than a normal woman, but she is far from normal.

"I've always loved the dark," Rona said. "I've always loved you, mother, though you never gave a damn." She pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling. The anger followed her, even now. Especially now.

Ámbar shook her head and made a sound deep in her throat, rather like a chuckle. The muscles in her shoulders lost their tension and she looked down at her hands. She put the letter opener down gently onto the aubergine sheen of the table. "Let me tell you a story," she said.

"I don't want stories! I want the truth. You've hidden it from me all these years—I deserve to know what you are!"

Ámbar pulled out the desk chair and sat, crossing her legs like a girl and pulling a package of cigarettes and a lighter out of a pocket in her shorts. Calmly she lit up and inhaled deeply, blowing the smoke at the shadowed ceiling.

"You are perhaps wondering about the caves."

Abruptly Rona went to the French doors and opened them wide, biting her lip. The outside air was warmer than inside, slightly scented with chlorine and the freshness of dew fall. Something else, some kind of flower; nicotina? Appropriate. Ámbar tapped her cigarette into a green glass ashtray on the desk. "Of course, the caves were never really ours. The land above, under the Sun, yes." She drew smoke in deeply and went on in a reminiscent tone. "We had 16 thousand acres, in grazing land, fodder crops for the cattle and horses; grapes ... there was a winery once. It's all down to this now. As you obviously know."

"This ... and whatever lives in the caves."

Ámbar stubbed her cigarette out, shrugging, looking very European.

Rona could see very well now, like looking through the binoculars but without the flatness and artificiality. Everything was real, everything had a deep, intricate shadow close behind it that told her more than the thing itself ever could; mute pieces of Ámbar's life talking to her in a blood-language she couldn't understand. It was like listening to the voices of bats.

Ámbar's face showed no expression other than calm good nature. She was very beautiful. Her lips were soft and full, her black eyes set deep under thick, perfectly shaped brows. Her hands were without any sign of age, even the raised veins and roughened knuckles of normal middle age. She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward slightly in the chair.

"Why don't you tell me what you want, Corona?"

I want the truth. Rona held Ámbar's gaze for a moment and then looked away, looked at her own hands with the ragged nails and the little half-healed cuts and abrasions from grubbing around on the hillside, trying to get enough data for a paper, trying to live a human life; *I want the truth.* What am I? What are you, my mother, a witch-woman with no past? No — too much past.

She ran her tongue along her lower lip, felt her heart tighten in her chest. "I remember going into the caves. I must have been very

young. I don't remember being afraid, only curious, holding your hand." She looked up again at Ámbar, who was watching her quietly, sitting absolutely still as if she wasn't even breathing. She had wrapped her hands around her knees. "You were coaxing me along, but you didn't need to. I dawdled because I was curious, not frightened."

Ámbar nodded. "Yes. I remember."

I must be right. This must really have happened.

"It was dark, but there were lamps. Oil lamps I think. There was the smell of bats and guano and stone. We went through a narrow place in the rock, you made me go ahead." She closed her eyes. The memory was starting to hurt.

"Go on," prompted Ámbar.

The room they'd entered had dazzled her childish eyes. A room, not recognizably a cave at all: it glowed with light from candles and lamps, upholstered chairs stood on oriental carpets, red and gold and cream; several braziers shed heat toward the ceiling, which was draped in vast swaths of fabric like the roof of a tent. The fabric moved and rippled as if tiny people were playing up there, running and jumping. Rona remembered staring upward, sure she could hear the cries and giggles of fairies.

"Something touched me. I looked down." She opened her eyes again, to the clear dark of Ámbar's house, the smell of the pool.

"That's all I remember."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing. Nothing until I was seven, at that school in Texas. It was as if I woke up and found myself there, in the middle of a new life." *What did I see, when I looked down?* "I had a hard time making friends, but I was good at almost everything: sports, math, reading. I was strong, and if I caught a cold it went away overnight. Everything was easy, except remembering what happened in the cave."

She came home for two weeks every summer, and one week at Christmas. Ámbar took her to Mass and gave her presents—old-fashioned jewelry, lengths of silk, elaborate dolls—stayed with her every minute, and then sent her away again. She had never allowed herself to cry until Ámbar was out of sight. Later she'd gone to a co-ed school in Maryland, learned better how to pass for normal (suspecting a lot of her classmates were doing the same thing, but perhaps for different reasons); got interested in biology.

She tried to put the anger away and recapture the feeling she'd had on the hilltop, the other night when she'd been waiting for Ámbar. She'd anticipated this meeting with a frisson of joy, compounded of fear, exhilaration, and the wonderful tension of an obsession about to be realized.

"I want to know what happened," she repeated stubbornly.

Ámbar looked away. "There is nothing to tell. Nothing to show you." She gestured vaguely with one hand, and began to grope for her cigarettes again.

Rona chewed her tongue, feeling suddenly hot with humiliation. She could gladly kill Ámbar now, or give it a good try. *That lazy wave of the hand, damn her, that shrug—I could sink my teeth into her flesh, taste her blood.* She could hear her own back teeth grind, her jaws shooting pain right up to her temples.

And if I drank her blood, then what would happen? Would I become an immortal like her?

She pushed the hot fury down and loosened her jaws, feeling them crack. "I know something was done to me. I'm not like other people, but I'm not like you either. I want to know who I am."

Ámbar sat very still, then she looked up, locking her black gaze on Rona. "Come," she said at last. "I'll show you. I'll show you the caves."

Rona let out her breath in a little puff of surprise.

She had to hurry. Ámbar led the way outside and walked quickly past the pool. Rona followed her naked calves that flashed through the night like silk cloth, smoother and more reflective than flesh. She stopped before a small door buried in a froth of bougainvillea and bolted shut by three iron rods.

She drew the bolts back with a reckless clash and hauled the door open. It squealed on its hinges, obviously not opened for some time.

They pushed through trailing branches amid a dry pink shower of petals.

"I don't remember this door."

"It was behind a small tool shed. The shed came down when I had the pool installed."

"Ah." Why hadn't she found it? Children explored all the time, poked around; why hadn't she known about it? "You hid it from me." Somehow.

Ambar didn't reply.

A stone stairway led precipitously down into darkness. Rona felt cool air circulating, brushing gently at her cheeks. Ambar stood at the top. "Shall I go first?"

Rona almost balked then, feeling madness all around, madness in herself. *She can hide things from me, and I'll never know it.* But she waved Ambar on and they descended, the air chilling the farther they went. Like wading into a lake. They passed along a corridor of rock, dark as pitch. Rona could see Ambar before her, vaguely, as if she were emitting faint light. Ghostly limbs, naked shoulders, and legs like phosphorescent sea creatures swimming. She held out her own hands before her.

What am I hoping to see? The heat of my body, the electricity in my veins and nerves, making me glow like a baby star? But she saw nothing.

There was the loud click of a switch and suddenly she saw they were in a cave, lit by an old-fashioned electric lamp sitting on a table, its shade brittle and yellow, trimmed with mouse-eaten fringe. The cave, about the size of an average living room, was floored roughly with poured concrete. Old floss-wrapped electrical wiring followed the angle of wall and terminated in an outlet bolted to the rock. Beside the lamp sat an electric kettle, its cord dangling. A dusty stack of teacups leaned in a small tower. A little tray held spoons and a bowl of sugar cubes, gray with dust and rotten with condensation.

"I can smell bats," Rona said. Bat guano, fungus, and mould. A smell she knew intimately. Her heart was beating very fast, and uncontrollable shivers ran along her arms under her sweater. She clenched her teeth again, to keep them from chattering.

Castling shadows before them, they passed into a long narrow slit that had apparently been widened with a pickaxe. It got dark again, out of range of the light, and Rona remembered suddenly the feeling of her mother's hand on her back, urging her forward. She couldn't bring back what Ambar might have been saying, but she could still feel the warmth of her hand. She hissed air through her teeth. The stench was getting so thick and ripe it was hard to breathe.

A large, high space, unlit, was at the end of the rocky narrows. Rona had been in enough caverns to guess this one's size by the feel of it on her eardrums and skin. Probably at least 50 meters across, and as high. They must be right under the hill. She heard Ambar strike a match and some of the blackness jumped back and strobed eerily as the tiny flame trembled.

Ambar lifted the glass from an oil lamp set in a niche, touched the match to the wick, shook it out, and expertly turned the wick down until it stopped smoking. She replaced the glass and the flame instantly steadied.

She spread her hands in an ironically grand gesture. "Here we are. Look around, tell me what you see."

Rona looked, breathing as shallowly as she could. Her eyes

THE
CREATURE
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ACROSS HER
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ARM AND
SANK ITS
TEETH
DEEP AS SHE
SHRIEKED.

watered. Usually she went into caves like this with a mask and a respirator.

There were mounds and shapes here and there that might once have been furniture, shrouded now in a thick layer of guano. Lamps hung from rusty sconces around the rough walls, unlit, filthy. Shreds of ancient draperies hung motionless from wires strung across the space, spattered with droppings and stained with mold. Above her was a constant whispering and shuffling.

There was nothing here of her childhood fairy tale memories. The cavern looked like the bottom of the sea, or as her brain stubbornly interpreted the night: muffled and smoothed by a gray snow of years and forgetfulness into a bland dirty roundness with dead things underneath.

She pulled the sleeve of her sweater over her mouth and looked around, trying to remember what it had been like.

Warm, golden, full of red velvet and white silk. Lamps glittering, mother whispering in my ear. I looked down—

A few bats flitted by quite close. She flinched involuntarily, gasping through the wool of her sweater.

Nothing but ordinary little brown bats, *Myotis lucifugus*, the most common species of bat in North America. This cave must connect to the outside by its own hidden mouth; there was a good-sized colony in here, bigger than the one which, in another life, she'd come to study. But nothing else. No magic.

Ambar's dark gaze followed the little animals as they darted nervously back and forth, kneading her upper arms with her long brown fingers. "I had two other children before you," she said slowly. "A boy named León who died before he was three years old, and then a girl much later. I named her Dolores. It was a bad luck name, a sad name. Still she lived, though she did not thrive. She died only a few years ago."

"I... I had a sister—why didn't you—"

"Tell you about her? She was an old woman by then. She was born in 1898,

fathered by a man whose name is not important. A Spaniard, though, of an old family; I suppose I still have my pride." Again she made her vague dismissive gesture, turning her wrist so the blue veins showed.

Rona shivered convulsively. Ambar did not seem to feel the cold of the caves, her bare arms and legs wearing a warm sheen of summer on them as if an ancient Sun had followed her underground, followed her everywhere she went.

"She aged," said Rona. "She died. Why?"

"Why not? Why do I stay young? I am aging very slowly, actually; I know I look about 40 now, and I changed when I was 14."

Rona turned for the slit in the rock, dizzy. "I... I have to get out of here. I'm going to be sick if we stay."

Through the black cleft in the rock, her mother close behind her; had it happened this way before? In the dusty little tearoom, she leaned against the wall by the rickety table, holding her abdomen with both hands. *If I plug in the kettle, will she make tea?*

"The diablillos died almost 20 years ago," Ambar said flatly, from across the drab little cell. "Just before I sent you away. I am the only human who truly changed, the only one who had the foolishness to listen to them." She patted her pockets, obviously looking for her

Continued on page 70

Portal and Final Fantasy VII demonstrate the triumph of evolution.

WITH SOME FREQUENCY (HOPEFULLY NOT A SICKENING FREQUENCY FOR THOSE WHO regularly read this column) I find myself drawn to describing new games in terms of evolution. I'm not the only one. I frequently see game reviews where the latest games are praised (or derided) as evolutionary advances over their predecessors. This has come to be applied to any game that is better — but only slightly better — than others in the same genre. You know the kind of pitch I'm talking about: *Quake* is radically advanced over *Doom*, but *Duke Nuke'em* was only an evolutionary change.

Now, what in the heck does evolution have to do with games? After all, games are human inventions. They shouldn't be subject to this random variation and cutting back we call evolution. Right? Well, maybe.

Games tend to start simple. The first board games and card games are lost in mists nearly as thick as those that mask the preCambrian world, but we do have more recent families to examine. For example, let's take a look at video and computer games. Successful commercial video games start flat against the cliff face of simplicity with *Pong*. There is the Cambrian Explosion of video games during the late '70's and early '80's, producing almost every form known today, followed by a long period of increasing diversity built around these existing branches. Throughout, the casual observer would be sure to spot a tendency to better graphics, better sound, and more complex plots.

Are these movements toward improvement real trends? In a world where quarters act as food and reproduction means sequels (or cloning of

ideas stolen from successful games), can't we say that there is an arrow of progress, inexorably driving games to get better and better? I don't think so. First of all, games face the same sort of simplicity limits that restrict the development of life. Sure graphics have gotten better overall — but could they have gotten worse? Can you make graphics more simplistic than *Pong* or the early text adventure games? Can you have less complexity than *Pong* and still have something you can really call a game? Maybe things got better because better was the only direction available. One thing is certain — now that games are moderately complex, there are at least as many derivative low-quality rip-offs of existing titles as there are games which actually advance any aspect of design.

Collectable card games are one of the newest branches

on the tree of gaming, but already this genre has undergone explosive growth. Starting with Wizards of the Coast's revolutionary *Magic: The Gathering*, card games have diversified into all aspects of fantasy, science fiction, and military history. You can now play card games that put you in charge of a starship, or make you responsible for southern forces at the battle of Gettysburg.

One thing about collectable card games that makes them a bit different from the video game example above — they

started out a good distance from the limits of simplicity. Somewhere back along the ancestral line lie the simple structures of Hearts, War, and even Fifty-two Card Pickup, but *Magic* arrives on the scene with a complete and complex genetic code. Like the living products of punctuated equilibrium, it has taken a big step away from its relatives.

The complexity of *Magic* hasn't been enough to prevent Wizards of the Coast from selling over a billion cards and attracting millions of players, but for the beginner the entry into the game can be fairly tough. With the complexity constantly bolstered by the addi-

Both the Playstation system's Final Fantasy VII (center) and the latest Magic game from Wizards of the Coast, Portal (left and right), show signs of evolutionary change.





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tion of new booster sets, revisions to the rules, and tournament regulations, it takes a strong commitment to the game to stay up to date. My own tournament record of 0-4 shows well enough that I haven't been keeping up with the curve.

Now Wizards of the Coast has taken steps to provide an entry point for players who like the idea of *Magic: The Gathering*, but feel intimidated by the hundreds of cards and obscure rules. Their new title, *Portal*, contains a smaller set of cards and considerably simpler rules. It makes for the perfect introduction for would-be *Magic: The Gathering* players who are tentative about jumping into the deep end of the pool. It also provides an afternoon's pleasure for those that only want to see what all the noise is about.

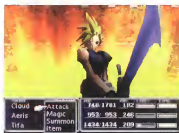
A *Portal* starter pack contains two complete decks of cards, rules, and fold out play mats to keep your gaming sessions neat. Everything is there to enjoy head to head competition without the need to purchase additional cards or track down an expanded book of rules and strategy. One especially nice point — every *Portal* starter set is the same. This may not seem like an advantage to those *Magic: The Gathering* players who snatch up additional packs in hopes of garnering rare cards, but by keeping all the decks the same, *Portal* offers some distinct advantages. First off, the two included decks are well balanced. No trading or booster decks are required to keep two beginners on an even keel. Secondly, by keeping the decks uniform, Wizards of the Coast is able to provide some very nice handholding.

Not only are the decks inside a *Portal* pack the same, they have been presorted so that the cards are in a specific order. When you first open the pack, you are instructed not to shuffle the decks, but to play the cards as they are. The rulebook guides you carefully through the first hands of this preordained conflict and shows how a game of *Portal* evolves. This sort of hands-on example makes catching onto the game play easy even for those of us with terminally thick skulls.

Simplification of *Portal* comes from two steps: eliminating some classes of combat spells, and cutting out some of the more difficult cards. In a full blown *Magic: The Gathering* contest, combat can be augmented by a class of spells known as instant which can radically alter, or reverse, the effects of battle. In *Portal* this group of cards has been eliminated.

By keeping the *Portal* set more restricted, Wizards of the Coast has reduced the chances of finding a trump among the deck.

Once players have mastered the combinations of cards included in the *Portal* boxed set, they can purchase special *Portal* booster cards full of new creatures and spells, and use them to improve their chances just as they can in full-blown *Magic*. Picking up a few packs of *Portal* boosters is probably a good idea for players still learning to put together an effective combat deck, but many players will



Playstation's Final Fantasy VII features some of the most detailed and colorful graphics found in a console game.

probably soon tire of *Portal* and its limits on expansion. Those who begin to chafe against *Portal*'s walls will step up in class to *Magic: The Gathering* and never look back.

And that's undoubtedly just what Wizards of the Coast has in mind. As its name implies, *Portal* is just a gateway. Those who play and enjoy can step up to the big leagues.

FINAL FANTASY VII — COMPLEXITY CAN BE GOOD

From the beginning, there has been a cold war between computer gamers and their brethren using dedicated consoles. Traditionally, consoles offered graphics, speed, and sound that the average home computer was hard-pressed to match. This made games like Nintendo's *Mario* series and Sega's *Sonic* multimillion copy sellers while computer owners gritted their teeth over less-impressive knockoffs. On the other hand, computers had more memory and storage ability. No dedicated console of the time could handle the length of plot or amount of variety provided in the best adventure and role-playing games.

Then, with improving technology and growing ubiquity, it began to appear that computers would completely unseat the console crowd. Graphics and sound in computers caught and passed their TV-bound rivals. The graphic abilities of the newest home computers are now up to a level barely surpassed by purpose-built arcade machines. Games like id Software's *GL Quake* and 3DO's new *Uprising* show the fearsome graphics firepower of the latest round of video cards and CPUs. With graphics out the wazoo, and storage to match, the home computer seemed poised to stomp out the game console infection.

But consoles haven't exactly been standing still. Over the last few years, consoles have bumped up both their processing power and their storage capabilities. The curve of their ascent hasn't quite matched the staggering improvement in PC's, but when you consider the cost and convenience of a dedicated console; it's easy to see why so many television sets are still linked to a Nintendo or Sony machine. And when you look at the richness and playability of the best console games, it's a sure bet that these little boxes won't disappear any time soon.

Final Fantasy VII, developed by Squaresoft for the Sony Playstation, shows that even in the PC's stronghold of adventure and role-playing, the current generation of consoles can more than hold their own. Packing three CD's with gameplay and cinematics, *Final Fantasy VII* tells a story that's as complex and compelling as anything you've seen on your computer monitor.

Players enter the game in the person of Cloud Strife, a young mercenary with little direction and few obvious scruples. Hired by a group of rebels on what at first appears to be a straightforward task, Cloud soon discovers that not everything is as it seems. To complete the adventure, Cloud will have to recruit friends, unravel several side plots, and experience considerable personal growth. In one of the most admirable facets of the game, this growth is not restricted to merely racking up higher hit points and new special abilities. Cloud actually seems to grow as a person — something few games on any hardware platform can boast.

Accompanying the complex plot, Squaresoft has drenched the game in some of the most detailed and colorful graphics to ever grace a console. Both the cinematic cut scenes and the ongoing gameplay benefit from graphics that are filled with spiffy touches and extra thought. Some of the puzzles and monsters do seem a little tired, and a couple are over the top in the silly department (a vampire house?), but with more than two hundred creatures to battle, a few bad apples don't do much harm to the experience.

If there's a weak point in *Final Fantasy VII*, it's the music and sound effects. In these later days, gamers are becoming accustomed to rich, symphonic scores. Compared to the depth of the gameplay and the strong graphics, *Final Fantasy's* music seems a little thin. The songs can be simplistic, and they repeat often enough to have you reaching for the mute button during long play sessions. The mood of the tunes also seems poorly matched to the on-screen action.

But forget the tunes. In fact, forget I said anything bad. I'm no great fan of Anime or of previous console adventures, but the sheer quality and scale of *Final Fantasy VII* will force you to believe. Consoles can pull off a good role-playing adventure, and this is the definitive proof. Completing the course through this game is one of the most satisfying gaming experiences I've had in a long time. ★

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QUEEN OF YESTERDAY

Continued from page 65

cigarettes, stopped when she remembered they were upstairs on her desk. She twined her fingers together instead, pulling hard against her own hands, and stared at Rona with an undecipherable look.

"I had two older brothers," she said at last. Her voice was very low. "Luis and Diego. A father whom I adored but saw little of. My mother died shortly after we arrived on this coast, when I was about six. The journey from Spain killed her, and my father never remarried. I was raised without benefit of mother or nurse or much priestly influence; I became wild and headstrong, a little princess in this barbaric new world."

She leaned her head back and drew a deep, trembling sigh. "Oh, God," she whispered, her voice suddenly thick with tears; it shocked Rona to hear plain human emotion from one so arrogant and strange. "It was so beautiful. So big and empty and golden..."

Again she sighed. "We would ride to the coast and trade grapes for smoked fish and abalone, feasting all night with a tribe of Chumash Indians there. My brothers took turns holding me before them on their horses, taking bigger and bigger jumps with the Indian boys, until Father found out." Ambar smiled, her throat working, tears running down her cheeks and glistening on her neck. "Then, the year I turned 13, I found them, or they pulled me in."

"Them?" Rona's voice was nothing more than a whisper. "What was it you found?"

Ambar looked down again, roughly wiping the tears from her face with the back of her hand. "I don't know. To this day I don't know. They looked like us in a way, and like the natives who lived around here, but small as children. And covered with soft brown fur."

"Like apes? Monkeys?"

"Oh no. Very much like foxes in a way, or bats. There were only two of them, and at first I took them for a mated pair, a couple, but I think now that they were sisters."

"What do you mean, they pulled you in?"

"I believe that is what they did," said Ambar slowly. "At the back of this cave, which was used for wine storage then, was a narrow cleft, an opening too slight for anyone, even a small girl, to pass through. I would press my ear against it, and hear whispering. Something kept calling me. I heard it in my dreams, I heard it even when I rode Father's mare Sombrio out alone as I had been forbidden to do. One night I awoke from a dream to find myself creeping stealthily out of the house, up that hill we met upon." Her eyes gleamed, no longer crying but deep with memory.

"I made my way in to the cave from the other side. The dream told me where that opening was, and in I went, scrambling in my nightdress. I felt hot, so alive—as if I were

on fire, as if my cheeks were glowing like embers in the dark.

"They were waiting for me. They touched me, climbed into my lap and stroked my hair, and told me I was their true child, only trapped in the body of a human. I could see nothing, but their fur was like satin, their voices sweet. They charmed me.

"The next night I took a lantern with me, and saw them. I admit I was disappointed, though I don't know what I expected to see." Ambar's lips tightened. "They told me that if I drank their blood, I would become like them. Well, at first I took it to mean I would look like them—small and hairy—and, a vain child, I said no and left them. They didn't ask again for a year, though I often went to their cave and listened to their stories of the past. I told them of the upper world, the sunny world, and they would sigh and hold each other and run their little black tongues around their lips.

"When I understood what they were offering me, I confided in Luis. Of course, he didn't believe me, and in fact told Father that it was time for me to go away to a convent school and learn some sense. So I changed my story, laughed at Luis for believing me, and was allowed to stay."

She looked up, straight into Rona's eyes. "I loved them, and they used that love against me. They used it to ensnare me, and they used their blood to bind me to them tighter than by love alone; I became in many ways like them."

"Like them?"

"A predator."

This close to her, Rona could almost see through Ambar's skin to the sharp, hard bones under it, could almost hear the strange blood shifting in her veins. She was in the lair of the goddess, underground, far from the realm of air and light.

Her mouth was dry as she spoke. "What were you doing with me, that night?" She didn't remember being afraid, only full of the thrill of a secret, a grown-up secret, soon to be hers.

"They wanted me to bring you to them, and when I followed you into the cavern that night, urging you on with my hand, I understood why. One sister was dead, the other holding her yet watching you with an avid, covetous stare. You wandered about the room, looking here and there, yet unaware of either of them—" Rona tried to think, tried to remember. The candles, the billowing silk. A thick hot smell. "—and then she made you come to her, she touched your arm—"

Ambar was beside her suddenly, the speed of her motion lifting Rona's hair and making her flinch back, too late. Ambar seized her wrist—"touched your arm, like this—" The fingers stabbed.

Rona felt as if she were being thrust into a furnace. She cried out, struggled to escape and could not. Ambar's hands were bars of hot iron.

Around her, painting the drab cave walls with sudden lurid color, bloomed the brilliant scene from 20 years past. The heat and light, the billowing silk and sumptuous furnishings. The wizened brown thing hanging on her arm like a velvety, child-sized leech. Almost her own size.

It was as clear as if she were there. She was there, she was a child again and the creature hissed into her face and lashed its tongue across her skin in quick little stings, tasting her.

It took her arm and sank its teeth deep as she shrieked.

The heat of the bite coursed up her arm and into her shoulder. She fell to her knees, the creature over her now, its mouth covered with blood. Its muzzle was like a black rose, petalled and moving, its skin like the purse Ambar carried when she went someplace special. Soft, soft velvet and roses and the smell of blood.

Its eyes were ancient windows, cold glass with not a glimmer of light or mercy in them. Alien eyes.

She looked away from them and whispered, her body flooding with bone-melting languor and a horribly delicious throbbing heat. *I've something special to show you, little one* —

The thing brought its arm up to her mouth. The six-year-old Corona leaned forward eagerly, feeling the spurt of her own saliva on her tongue. *Mother's hand on my back, urging me on.*

It was so beautiful. But Mother is crying, why is she crying? And then Ambar let her go.

Rona staggered back against the wall of the little cave, knocking over the table and sending the tea-cups flying. She clapped a hand to her mouth and swallowed back vomit. Her mouth was flooding saliva, and her stomach had knotted into a ball of hunger. She locked eyes with Ambar, snarling at her through the waves of sickness. She remembered now, what had happened next.

"You killed her! She, the last one!" Ambar didn't answer or even nod. She stared at Rona, her chin high, her mouth a suffering black line across her golden skin.

"You killed her, and kept me from what you have." As the sickness waned she got control of her breathing. The smell of blood gaped in her memory like a wound.

"She was making you into another sister, like her—like her as I never was. She would have destroyed the human in you and taken you for her own. I was their servant, but you would have been their kin."

Rona could remember it now. She'd been screaming, tearing at her mother's arms like a wildcat while Ambar raised a heavy chair over and over, smashing it against the silent, twisting creature on the stones. Her fury had been as murderous as Ambar's, but powerless against it. Only a child.

Ambar's lips were trembling, and Rona

could see her chest heaving as if sobs were boiling up. She had claimed to look 40; now she looked as if all her magic years had landed on her at once. Her hair was still black and her skin smooth, but she seemed almost transparent, rubbed thin by too much time. "Do you know what a hell I had been living?" she asked. "Can you possibly imagine? Everything, everyone I loved vanished into dust behind me. León dead, just a baby, Dolores an imbecile all her life. They were imperfect, deliberately flawed. They couldn't let me love anyone else. I watched Dolores grow old and die while I stayed young, and it was like wearing a crown of thorns."

She crossed herself mechanically, and then gave a bitter laugh. "Hell is here on Earth, Corona, and I would not have you become one of Hell's own creatures."

Rona steadied herself against the wall. "So I changed, but just a little. That one bite ... I can see a little better than most people in the dark, hear things others can't." An infection, or a drug, it has to be something that makes sense—is there any way to make sense of this?

She pulled back the sleeve of her sweater and looked for a scar. Perhaps the hint of a jagged, paler mark near her elbow, a slight difference in the soft skin there. But I've always healed so quickly. She looked up again, shivering.

"Why did they let me live?" "Because they needed you. They were no more immortal than I am, and they knew that inevitably one or the other would die. Until that night, I was grateful to them for letting me keep you, grateful for your beauty, your intelligence ... and all along you were destined to become one of them. I couldn't bear it."

"So you sent me away. I couldn't understand why. I thought I had made you hate me somehow, that you were ashamed of me." She stopped. How I longed for your love. Did you feel my hurt in your own veins, each time you let me visit? "I must have blocked out the memory completely. Pretty traumatic scene for a six year old." Magic woman, predator woman, were you afraid you might prey on me?

Ambar said, very softly, "I was their slave for two hundred years. Don't forget that, my little one. I was the one who was ashamed."

Rona straightened and pushed herself away from the wall, the knot in her stomach almost gone. She reached for her mother's hand, and after a moment Ambar stepped forward and took it. The touch of a woman who was not quite human, nor completely a monster. She was crying again. No more children; no more magic. It's better gone. Perhaps we can both pretend that she's just my mother.

"Come on," Rona said. Ambar's fingers were cold and faintly glowing. "Let's go up now. I want ... I'd like to hear about my grandfather." She tucked Ambar's hand under her arm. **✶**

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TITHING NIGHT

Continued from page 51

ago forgotten how to express it. Yet for a moment her burning eyes lost a little of their pain, and the hard fire in them became warmer.

"You may rest." He bent toward her and his lips brushed hers in a salute, kindred to kindred. Her skin felt like paper, like sand; they drew apart and she turned away. He watched her walk deeper into the canyon, and around him the tiny, elemental things gathered; flickering lights, chattering voices, wizened faces that skimmed between dimensions. They could not follow where she was going, and he sensed their distress. It would pass. They would learn soon enough to love their new master.

Ahead of the white woman now he saw, with vision that was more than human, the shadowy outlines of a great iron gate between the narrowing canyon walls. He heard a deep creaking as the gate swung back on ancient hinges, and glimpsed a shimmer of something beyond its boundary; colors that moved darkly through the spectrum, a pulsing mist that gave brief form to shapes whose familiarity eluded the mind and were gone before they could be committed to memory. The white woman stepped through; light coalesced around her, and her aura was suddenly gold. Then, like the clang of an old, old bell, the gate closed and she was gone.

He stood still for a while. The rift between this world and the domain of Chaos had closed with the closing of the gate; now only the silent black canyon remained. After a little time he felt a spidery touch against his cheek, heard a thin, curious whisper by his ear. Acknowledging the new order of things, the Flickerers were making their presence known to him. He smiled. Then at last he turned and looked back along the road to the village.

His predecessor had served Chaos faithfully, and he hoped that he, too, would prove worthy of the Lords who had appointed him to this task. The tithing would continue, while the good village folk loved their gods and paid homage to them, and those gods repaid their faith and fealty with sustenance for their bodies and succor for their souls. It was as it always had been; as it always would be. The price was willingly paid, and the chain would go on unbroken.

In his inner eye he saw the face of a girl of 16. Plump face, trim and rounded little figure; neither quite pretty nor quite plain. But a sweet nature. A girl on whom Chaos looked fondly. He smiled. "Until another time, Liddi," he said, and the echoes came softly back to him from the shadows of the canyon.

In the dark a tiny, catlike face hung disembodied, and mewed. The elementals were gathered about him; at a silent command they flitted away, lighting the road ahead like eager fireflies, as he began to walk down toward the village. ■

LUSTMAN

Continued from page 45

the night wasn't a complete loss.

I nod my head.

If I'd stayed with you, Pilar, I wouldn't have gotten in at all.

Yes, I say, I know. You do right. One of us should get something. I be mad at myself for saying that, but what else can I say?

We get to Mary Kate's place and I wash the paint off'n my face and get on my own stuff and get to the nuns for when Mommi and Poppi get up.

Sister Carrie wheeze at me with her bad chest. You have lovely parents, dear. They didn't seem to mind being here at all. Your father even told the others stories. She look at me hard then and she say, Did you have a good time?

Yes, I say. What else I can say? Yes, I have a real good time. I go to the Zone and check it out.

Sister Carrie, she squinch up she little nose, Not much of a place for an intelligent woman, she say. They care for nothing but beauty and fashion there. Beauty doesn't last and fashions change. There are no friendships there, nothing real. Like building your house on sand.

Them nuns is tough. They all blackbelt in beating up people. They beat you up if you cross them. Even the Floydboys give them space. I want to hit her, but I can't. Can't do nothing, so I just say, You got a house on sand, Sister, least you got a house.

I get Mommi and Poppi out in the needle cold to our place and I write some notes that say, Your Pilar is at work and she be back tonight and she love you. I tell them I go to work and make sure they eat, and then I get that goddamn bus to go back to my Lady. It real quiet and I can think on that bus.

My Lustman be in the big parlor room and he stand up when the me with long legs and tiny waist and that long, curly hair, she come through the door. He take his big steps to me and fold me into he chest. I feel wet on my neck from his eyes.

I waited and waited. How could you leave me all alone? Didn't you think about me here all alone?

I turn my head and kiss him gentle and kiss his eyes, very gentle. I say, I think I know where to find you but you not be there, my sweet man, my love, you not there at all.

I feel his chest move a little and see he's laughing now, soft and quiet. I'm here, he say, I'm always here. Where else would I be?

My Lustman and me go to that white bed like a little house where our real home is and we give to each other and we take from each other and we be happy. We be happy. ■

BOOKS

Continued from page 17

and then generously opens a huge, positively boggling, alphabetically arranged display of as many of the top artists working in the field of science fiction as I have ever seen assembled in one place.

It's really quite a show as the art ranges from the old, old days all the way up to the here and now. You'll have a chance to get a little teary as you catch sight of some drawing which snagged you as an innocent youth and dragged you bodily into the fantastic. You'll get all sorts of background information on the lives and times of these people. I confess I found this aspect of the book particularly fascinating and revealing since science fiction artists do not get much in the way of press coverage. I learned all sorts of things altogether new to me about artists whose covers and illustrations I'd admired. And, since *Di Fate's* selection is astute, you'll get an excellent introduction to, and really

fair notion of, the vision of creators you may never have encountered before.

The Conjurer Princess by Vivian Vande Velde; HarperPrism, NY; 240 pp.; mass market paperback; \$4.99

Some books we enjoy because of the startling new ideas they present. Some we enjoy because of their clever, thrill-a-minute plots. Some we enjoy because they take us to unique places we've never visited before. But some books, as we read them, feel like old friends. They are the equivalent of "comfort food": books that remind us fondly of other books we have read, whose characters immediately engage our emotions, whose plots carries echoes of familiar and



deeply moving themes.

In reading *The Conjurer Princess*, I felt I had discovered an old friend. Vande Velde's novel is the story of Lyrene, a sixteen-year-old girl whose sister has been abducted and forced to marry her abductor. Lyrene vows to rescue her sister, and apprentices herself to a deceitful wizard so that she can learn magic and gain the power she needs to fulfill her vow. Vande Velde's treatment of magic is unique and makes for some fun surprises in the book. Rather than being taught over a long period, magic here is learned all at

once, during an initiation ceremony that can only take place at the equinox. The amount learned and the specifics learned depend on one's predisposition for magic.

Lyrene discovers that her strongest talent is duplication. She can duplicate anything—a coin, a cloak, an arrow—though, as she later finds out, the duplicates fade away within a few hours. Unfortunately, the initiation ceremony occurs between the astral planes, a place where time passes much more quickly. So when the ceremony ends, Lyrene finds that she is seventy years old.

The wizard tells Lyrene the only way to regain her former age is to wish these years onto other people, aging them prematurely. Lyrene, anxious to regain her former health and appearance, justifies this at first by choosing only cruel or dishonest people, and wishing only a year or two of age onto each of them. But later she succumbs to temptation and wishes years onto people who have done no wrong, feeling horribly guilty after.

With the help of two thieves, Lyrene eventually infiltrates the castle of her sister's abductor and finds her sister. What she finds is not what she expected, which makes the book feel all the more real. Like every young person, Lyrene does not yet fully understand the world, and she still has a lot to learn.

The Conjurer Princess mixes the familiar and the unfamiliar to create a story that feels at once comfortable and fresh. Visiting Vande Velde's medieval setting is like returning to a favorite vacation spot. The plot, with thieves, wizards, and evil rulers, is one we relish, and carries enough surprises to keep us reading. And meeting these characters is like making instant friends. Most of the freshness in Vande Velde's story arises from her use of magic. Lyrene's talent for duplication, her need to wish years of aging onto others, and some other magical innovations I won't give away here add a unique spice to this comfort food, and provide it with a memorable depth and resonance.

Jeanne Cavelos

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

A Magic Lover's Treasury of the Fantastic, Edited and with an introduction by Margaret Weis, Warner Aspect Trade Paperback \$13.99. Longing for a little magic in your life? Within the pages of this enchanted collection you will find stories by such notable authors as Ursula K. Le Guin, Ray Bradbury and Roger Zelazny to name a few. Also ROF favorite Robert Silverburg. A dazzling collection of the most acclaimed award-winners in the fantasy field.

The Book of Night with Moon, by Diane Duane, Warner Aspect Trade Paperback \$12.99. In the tradition of "Watership Down," an adventure of feline fantasy set in contemporary New York. Ancient evil will confront cats that can weave spells and defend the Earth in an ultimate battle between good and evil. "Bite: bite hard and find the tenth life..."

Master and Fool, "The Book of Words," Volume III, by J.V. Jones, Warner Aspect Paperback \$5.99. A rousing conclusion to "The Book of Words" trilogy by the rising star of adventure-fantasy. A mad king, a sadistic wizard and reign of terror shatter kingdom after kingdom. The errant knight called Tawl and the baker's son, Jack, must combine their power and strength to change the very heart of Destiny. Compared to Roger Zelazny's "Amber" series, a sensational fantasy for all lovers of intrigue and colorful saga/adventure.

Polgara the Sorceress, by David and Leigh Eddings, A Del Rey Hardcover \$25.95. An epic culmination of the saga that is the Eddings' Belgariad and Malloreon

cycles. The offspring of these two extraordinary beings, Polgara begins her life in a tower. To make peace and to make war, to guard that which is the world's last hope, and to discover the powers that are her destiny - she must assume the bird-shape that will serve her well on her adventures. Reading this book is to know and experience the magic and the majesty of Polgara's family prophecy. A stunning "farewell" of a story that will stay with the reader long after the last page has been turned.

Four and Twenty Blackbirds, "Bardic Voices," Book IV, by Mercedes Lackey, Baen Books Hardcover, \$22.00. An inventive fantasy novel by popular author Mercedes Lackey. A grisly tale of a magical maniac in the tradition of "Silence of the Lambs." Beware the faint of heart - the hunt is on! If you missed the first three Bardic Voices novels, they can be found within the trade edition "The Free Bards."

The Authorian Companion, "The Legendary World of Camelot and the Round Table," by Phyllis Ann Karr, A Chaosm Book \$14.95. Author of the Arthurian murder mystery entitled "Idyllis of the Queen," Phyllis Ann Karr has put together, in marvelous style, over one thousand entries of who, what, where and how in the confines of Arthurian legend and lore. Inclusive of the Fisher King, Le Mort D'Arthur, Lancelot's Kin, the Orkney King and listings from Abblasore to Zelembres - a comprehensive guide for both research and entertainment.

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Contributors.

PAT YORK LIVES IN WESTERN NEW York State with her husband, James and her children Ben and Nora. She attended Clarion Workshop in '93. She has published stories in *Tomorrow* and the anthologies *Full Spectrum 5*, *New Altars*, *The Roycroft Review* and the upcoming *Datlow/Windling* alternate fairy tale anthology, *Silver Birch*, *Blood Moon*. She is currently at work on two books, one set in the world of *My Lustman* and the other a story of family values in far future Chautauqua County, New York. This is her second story for *Realms of Fantasy*.

Mary O'Keefe Young graduated from Parsons School of Design in New York City in 1982. Mary likes to create a magical quality with her watercolors by using dramatic light. Capturing the beauty of human expression is of prime importance in her work. A love of the natural world and art history is also evident in her artwork. Mary's studio is in her home in White Plains, New York. She enjoys using her family and friends as models and dressing them up in costumes which she has collected or sewn herself.

Sally McBride has published works in *Asimov's*, *Fantasy* and *Science Fiction*, *Dead of Night*, *On Spec* and more. She recently won Canada's Aurora Award for short fiction, and has been nominated for both Nebula and Hugo awards. Sally and her husband edit and publish the semi-pro 'zine *TransVersions*.

Louise Cooper was born near London and currently resides in the Vale of Evesham, sort of sandwiched between the Coltswood hills and the Malvern hills, with Stratford-upon-Avon about ten miles away. Louise loves gardening, cooking and her cat, Spike. Spike believes that laps were invented for him to sit on, especially when the owner is trying to type, and w/p screen cursors are something to be stalked and thoroughly killed. Louise has just completed a sequel to her children's novel, *Daughters of Storms*, for Hodder; its title is *The Dark Caller*. Her last completed adult novel was *Sacrament of Night*, a one-off, published in the UK by Headline. She is now finishing another children's book, this time for Hamish Hamilton/Puffin, *Stormghost*, a supernatural adventure set in Cornwall and concerning a long-ago lifeboat disaster. Future projects include a adult novel, *Our Lady of Snow*, which parallels with eighteenth century Imperial Russia — though with, of course, her inevitable darkly supernatural slant....

John Monteleone has been a professional illustrator for the past ten years, working for such impressive clients as Time Warner, 20th Century Fox, Scholastic Books, The Franklin Mint, The Hamilton Collection, and most of



Mary O'Keefe Young



Sally McBride

the major publishing firms. His use of dramatic light source and sharp realism have caught the eye of the Science Fiction and Fantasy community. Certified to teach Jeet Kun Do, he combines his knowledge of combat with his realistic painting style in his first book, *Creatures in Combat*.

Peni R. Griffin is an Air Force brat. Her childhood was spent reading and taking long car trips as they moved from Texas to Alaska, Alaska to Iowa (while her father was in 'Nam) Iowa to Maryland, and Maryland back to Texas. Peni came to San Antonio to attend two universities, graduating from neither. In 1987 she married Michael D. Griffith, A.K.A. Damon. They live in a ninety-year old house near downtown San Antonio with their housemate, Michael Christy and three cats. Griffin's secret identity is as a word processor for an appraisal firm. At lunch she sits in the river watching for herons, snowy egrets and interesting fauna. Her ninth book, *Margo's House*, was published in October 1997. Her best known books are *Switching Well*, and the Edgar-nominated mystery *The Treasure Bird*. Projects currently making the rounds of publishers include a ghost story, a time-travel story involving mammoth hunters on the Edwards Plateau, a young adult lesbian novella and a novel-length fairy tale. Recently, *Scholastic* bought a short story, "The Truth in the Case of Eliza Mary Muller, by Herself," for the upcoming YA anthology *Stay True: Stories of Strong Girls*.

Jeff Potter resides in beautiful Southeastern Massachusetts. Jeff's artwork currently appears in the film *Reasonable Doubt*, starring Melanie Griffith and Craig Sheffer.

Jeanne Cavelos wrote the *Babylon 5* novel *The Shadow Within*, which has been called "one of the best TV tie-in novels ever written" (*Dreamwatch*). Other recent works include a novella, "Negative Space," in the anthology *Decalog 5: Wonders* from Virgin Publishing.

Mark Sumner is the author of *The Extreme Zone*, from Pocket Books. He has also authored *Devil's Tower*, and *Devil's Engine*, for Del Rey, as well as *News from the Edge*, for Berkeley. A "practicing" paleontologist, Mark goes on a dig to some "god-forsaken" place each August. **✶**

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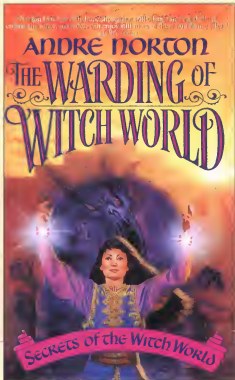
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